

# Isham – Adams

The origins of a family in the Canadian Fur Trade

1732-1898

Pat Redhead

Cover photo – P. Redhead

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### *Dedication*

*To my six-times-great grandparents, James Isham and his Cree wife,  
& my mother, Verna Adams Redhead, who recovered this lost ancestry for our family.*

### Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the Hudson Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, for preserving the records of the Company and making them accessible to researchers of the fur trade era and descendants of the early fur traders.

I am grateful to many people:

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- *The organizations and institutions that digitize primary and secondary sources that would otherwise have been inaccessible.*

# Introduction

It was no secret that some of our ancestors were Cree women who had married English fur traders long before Canada was a country. Memories of these women and men were slipping away, however, as each new generation focused on the present and the elders deliberately withheld some stories.

My mother, Verna Adams Redhead, knew that a group of families had travelled by Red River cart on the old Carlton Trail from Winnipeg to Prince Albert in 1880. As the hundredth anniversary of their arrival approached, she and her cousins began to create a family tree of the descendants of those first homesteaders.

Mom was born in 1925 on a farm southwest of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan and the family moved to the city soon after. The north and south branches of the Saskatchewan River converge just east of the city and continue to Cedar Lake in northern Manitoba. From there, water from the Rocky Mountains flows down the Hayes and Nelson River systems to Hudson Bay. Just south of Prince Albert, the two branches form natural boundaries for a triangle of fertile land that included the towns of Duck Lake, Macdowall, and Red Deer Hill. Across the south branch were the historic communities of Batoche, Saint Laurent, and St. Louis. There were several rural graveyards in the area, reminders of the first settlers who built churches near their farms in the 1880s. St. Paul's Lindsay was typical, a small log building covered with white plaster and a peaked roof but no grand steeple. The oldest headstones were crudely made of concrete and wood, but a few were tall obelisks carved from stone. Verna was baptized in this church and ninety years later was buried there.

The land around the Adams farm was flat, with sandy loam soil that had eons before been the bottom of a shallow glacial lake. It was a transitional zone between the open prairie to the south and the spruce forest north of the city. Here, the land was dotted with sloughs and hummocks, dense with trembling Aspen in places and bald with prairie grasses in others. In summer, the sky was a panorama of cumulous clouds, dark flat bottoms skimmed the earth while billowing white thunderheads built to great heights. In winter, the sky was slate gray and heavy with snow or clear blue with dazzling sunshine.

Verna was engaged in reclaiming her ancestors at an exciting time, just as academics, activists, and politicians were trying to understand the impact of the fur trade era on the present. Supporting this renewed interest and study was improved access to the historical records of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), which had begun in 1670 trading furs with indigenous people at forts on Hudson Bay, but by 1975 was noted for its department stores in cities across Canada. Two hundred years worth of post journals, account books, and correspondence from 1670 to 1870 were moved from London, England, to a new archive in Winnipeg. At about the same time that Verna began travelling to the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) to read records written by James Isham, James Bird, and her other ancestors, two young graduate students were asking new questions about fur trade society. What role did women play, asked Sylvia van Kirk, since they were all indigenous? What was the nature of families, asked Jennifer Brown, when European traders took indigenous women as 'country wives'? By 1980, Verna had two new books in her collection that provided glimpses into the family relationships of her ancestors, James Isham and James Bird - van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties* and Brown's *Strangers in Blood*.

In preparation for a family reunion in 1980, Verna visited the old timers in Macdowall to collect stories about the first homesteaders. Someone gave her the Métis sash of her great-grandfather; another the cashmere shawl of her great-grandmother. Bemoaning the fact that the children had no interest in the past, one woman gave her a large framed photograph of Ann Heywood Adams who had left Manitoba with her adult children to settle in the Northwest Territories twenty-five years before the province of Saskatchewan was formed. Perhaps it was these artifacts that solidified her resolve to document the family tree.

Verna's interest in her ancestors was also piqued when she became manager of the Prince Albert Museum as it moved into the renovated fire hall overlooking the Saskatchewan River. She developed new displays, conducted historical city tours, and published a book of reminiscences of the area's oldest citizens. She attended conferences and took courses in places like Banff and Edmonton. She was appointed to the national museum board and consulted with small museums across the province.

In the fall of 1980, after Verna and her cousins hosted the family reunion, the news media erupted with stories of the Constitution Express, a train carrying indigenous people from British Columbia to Ottawa protesting plans for repatriation of the Canadian constitution. They had not been consulted by the government of Pierre Trudeau, the protesters explained, and they feared that the treaties they had negotiated with the British crown would be nullified. The trains stopped along the way to pick up more people and by the time the express reached its destination there were one thousand protestors and another thousand already in Ottawa. Having little success, some continued to New York where they petitioned the United Nations and then on to Europe where they urged the British Parliament to refuse the Canadian government's request. By 1982, the constitution included section 35 which guaranteed the historical rights of the indigenous people, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit.

Suddenly, there was an ethnicity that our family could claim. My grandfather, Chestley Charles (Chuck) Adams, was seventy-six at the time. "Well", he said, "They've won again." His reaction was based on his family's experience with the French Catholic Métis of Batoche who lived across the river when he was a boy. His father told a story of hiding in a church in 1885 when he was seven years old because the Adams family did not support Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont, leaders of the Northwest Rebellion. My grandfather refused the label Métis but was proud of his indigenous heritage. What he didn't know was that tensions between the English and French who were part-indigenous went back even further to the first Riel insurgency in 1870 in Manitoba. By selecting the label Métis for people of mixed Euro-Indigenous ancestry, the Canadian government had unwittingly taken sides.

Two books published about that time painted pictures of the lives of some Métis. Maria Campbell in *Half-Breed* described the poverty of a small community in northern Saskatchewan where her family of hunters and trappers were marginalized as settlers took the land. She left with her white husband and, after years on the streets of Vancouver, became an outspoken advocate for Métis rights. Howard Adams<sup>1</sup> in *Prison of Grass* told of discrimination as a half-breed young man in St. Louis, Saskatchewan, and his agonizing decision to leave. He earned a

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Adams was my grandfather's second cousin. They were both great-grandsons of George Adams and Elizabeth Heywood.



PhD in California, taught at universities in British Columbia and Saskatchewan, and wrote books that reframed the history of the Canadian west from an indigenous perspective. Both Campbell and Adams identified with the supporters of Riel and Dumont during the troubles of 1885. “These aren’t my stories,” I mused. “I’m not Métis.”

I was not alone in remaining silent about our English-Cree ancestry. My grandfather was interviewed in 1981<sup>2</sup> and asked, “How are the people in Macdowall different from other towns in the area?” It was an opening that he could have used to acknowledge his mixed ethnicity, but he didn’t. “Well,” he said, “They were the descendants of Selkirk settlers.” That response implied that they were Scots recruited by Lord Selkirk to establish the first colony in the Northwest at the site of present-day Winnipeg. He didn’t disclose that Ann Heywood, wife of Selkirk-settler George Adams, was both British and Cree. And, when my mother published the genealogy of those early settlers, the only mention of their indigenous heritage was tucked away in an appendix that traced Ann Heywood’s origins to James Isham and his ‘country wife’. There was no mention of Cree ancestors unless you understood the euphemism. So, in this context of non-disclosure, I had learned that our private stories were best left unspoken.

My brother, Gordon, on the other hand, became Métis. He grew his hair long and pulled it back into a ponytail. He learned to smudge sweetgrass and participated in sweat lodges with elders. In his career with a federal government agency, he became the resident expert on indigenous issues. We discussed this difference between us several times over the years and concluded that it was likely because our experiences had diverged. When I left home, he was only ten. I lived with our English grandmother while going to university and began travelling to Europe in my twenties where I met our father’s cousins and visited granny’s village. Gord moved to Prince Albert with the family and spent time with our mother’s part-Cree aunts and uncles in Macdowall. He never went to England and had less contact with our English grandmother. Same family; different identities.

Mom’s research continued throughout the 1980s until she was able to trace the descendants of James Isham down the generations to my grandfather. She was an early member of the Rupert’s Land Research Centre established in 1984 at the University of Winnipeg and attended several conferences that brought together academics and family historians. At each one, she met researchers such as Brown and van Kirk who contributed to her understanding of the context of our ancestors’ lives. During one, she took a field trip to Norway House at the northern tip of Lake Winnipeg where Ann Heywood had been born.

In 1988, my mother, father and I went to the Orkney Islands off the north coast of Scotland. Our earliest British ancestors would have come from the islands or passed through on their way to North America. The main island is small and treeless with ancient cultural connections to Scandinavia. There are stone circles and archaeological sites that pre-date the pyramids of Egypt. The town of Stromness was much as it was during the early fur trade with cobblestone streets meandering along two-story buildings that faced the harbour. There was a museum in one of them and a few steps from there a public well with a historic marker stating, ‘There watered here the Hudson Bay Company’s ships 1670 - 1891.’

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<sup>2</sup> Saskatchewan Archives, Chuck Adams S-482, S-483

Five years later, Verna and her cousins printed the genealogy book, *The Descendants of George Adams and Ann Heywood*, documenting the offspring of nine of their twelve children to about 1990, a total of about three thousand people.



*Stromness Harbor 2002*

*My mother, sister and I visited the Orkney Islands. We sat on a wooden bench overlooking the harbor and, with a little imagination, envisioned the sailing frigates that used to gather there before leaving as a convoy to the British colonies or Hudson Bay. (photo-P. Redhead)*

Mom moved in with me years later, bringing her files, photos and artifacts. As she aged and forgot many of the stories she had collected from the old people, I took more interest and responsibility in her work. My search for information became a quest that took years. I travelled to the places where our ancestors lived. I felt the cold wind off Hudson Bay; I saw the banks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers from a small boat; I walked the sandy road to a rural church in northern Saskatchewan; I watched as thunderclouds rolled across High Bluff from the west. I displayed mom's artifacts in my home – my great-great grandfather's Métis sash; two rough-hewn timbers from the old church where my ancestors were buried; an oval photograph of my three-times-great grandmother. Bookshelves loaded with fur trade books. Notebooks filled with research and writing. I became the keeper of the family tree.

Two technological innovations were available to me that hadn't existed during my mother's time – the Internet and DNA analysis. I could search the HBC Archives records online and download images of journal pages, maps, correspondence, and other primary sources created

over two hundred years ago. I could access thesis papers of graduate students studying the fur trade, government Sessional papers with complete transcripts of the trials resulting from the 1885 Northwest Rebellion, newspaper stories from 1885, and census pages from 1870 to 1921. I could read books online that were out of print and preview pages of the newly published. When DNA testing for genealogy purposes became available in about 2010, mom and I both sent in samples. The results confirmed what we had always known but also connected me to DNA cousins who shared photos and community histories of our common ancestors. These new sources revealed details of our ancestors' lives that we didn't know.

Eventually, I decided to write about the lives of our ancestors, hoping to bring them to life for younger family members. In the process, I came to understand my own identity. The book begins in 1732 with the arrival of a young English man at a fur trading fort on Hudson Bay and follows three more generations on that branch of the family tree. Under-represented in historical works, 'English half-breeds', or 'les autres Métis' as Louis Riel called them, are virtually unknown to historians, students, and their own descendants. Spanning 170 years, the story is set in western Canada beginning with the fur trade era, continuing through the creation of the province of Manitoba, and culminating with the Riel uprising at Batoche in 1885. The four life stories in this book show how the English - Cree mix developed into a recognizable ethnic group and explores the impact of this mixed ancestry on the present generation.

### *Terminology*

**Half-breed, Métis:** Métis means 'mixed' and was initially used in Canada for people of mixed French and Indigenous ancestry. Half-breed was applied to people of Indigenous and English, Scottish, or Orcadian origins, especially by the Canadian government from 1870-1900. In 1982, Métis were included in the Canadian constitution and nowadays it is used for both groups. Where I have used 'half-breed', it is consistent with practices at the time.

**Indian, First Nations:** The misnomer, Indian, is used only in direct quotations from historical records. 'First Nations' is never used because it is a 20<sup>th</sup> century term.

**Indigenous:** Three types of people are recognized in the Canadian Constitution as being indigenous to North America – First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

### *The Times in which they Lived*

- 1670 The British king granted the Hudson's Bay Company a trade monopoly in Rupert's Land.
- 1741 Two ships searching for the Northwest Passage stayed at Churchill over the winter.
- 1756 Seven Years War began. Trade was disrupted.
- 1763 Seven Years War ended. France lost its North American colonies to Britain and Spain. The Royal Proclamation protected Indigenous territory.
- 1774 As Montreal traders returned to the Northwest, the HBC began building forts inland. Cumberland House was the first.
- 1781 Many indigenous people died in the first smallpox epidemic to reach Rupert's Land.
- 1782 Three HBC forts on the Bay were destroyed by French ships and the men captured. The HBC rebuilt.
- 1791 Britain created Upper and Lower Canada.
- 1812 The first group of Scottish settlers arrived at the Red River colony (now Winnipeg). Further east, the War of 1812 began.
- 1815 Colonists fled on two occasions because of North-West Company violence.
- 1817 Lord Selkirk negotiated a treaty with indigenous leaders for farmland for the colonists.
- 1821 The HBC and NWC merged. Many men lost their jobs and moved to the Red River colony with their native families.
- 1826 A major flood destroyed the colony and three hundred people left.
- 1847 A series of epidemics killed many in the colony.
- 1867 The British North America Act created Canada.
- 1869 Louis Riel and his supporters seized Fort Garry and formed a provisional government.
- 1870 Canada annexed Assiniboia and created the new province of Manitoba.
- 1882 Thousands of Metis left Manitoba in the decade following the creation of Manitoba.
- 1885 Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont were leaders in the Northwest Rebellion. Battles took place at Duck Lake and Batoche.
- 1890 The first train arrived in Prince Albert

## Chapter One: James Isham (1716-1761)



#### *Rupert's Land*

*King Charles II granted the new Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) exclusive rights to trade with indigenous people for furs in a vast area He named Rupert's Land. Theoretically, it included all the land with rivers draining into the Bay, but no one with the Company had been to the Saskatchewan River or the Red, or any others beyond the forts. So, Rupert's Land was a concept, an idea that would take decades to define and understand. In contemporary terms, it covered about one-third of what is now Canada, including Manitoba, Saskatchewan, south and central Alberta, parts of Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, and the northern parts of Ontario and Quebec.<sup>3</sup> There was no border, so the trading empire also included parts of what is now Minnesota and North Dakota.*

*Elsewhere in North America, Europeans had been competing for territory for two hundred years. The British colonies included Acadia, Hudson's Bay, Newfoundland and the thirteen colonies that would later become the United States. New France consisted of the colony of Canada, along the St. Lawrence River; Ile Royale (Cape Breton) with the Fort of Louisburg; and Louisiana, an extensive area south of the Great Lakes along the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico, and west to the Rocky Mountains (although settlement didn't extend that far). Spain claimed most of present-day Mexico, the West Indies, and the southern American states of Florida, New Mexico, Texas, and California. Maps at the time depicted most of North America as unknown and, therefore, mysterious. (Map: Canadian Geographic/The Canadian Atlas)*

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<sup>3</sup> Rupert's Land, The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2006/2015 ([www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/ruperts-land/](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/ruperts-land/))

## May 1732 London, England

James Isham was the middle child of a family with neither status nor wealth, in the largest city in Europe at the center of an international trading empire. Society was structured, with a privileged aristocracy and impoverished lower class, but his family was of the 'middling sort'<sup>4</sup> and, as such, his future would be comfortable, but unremarkable. As it turned out, he would go places and meet people that few British men could imagine. And, two centuries later, he would figure prominently in history books about the Canadian West.

The Isham family had lived for generations near Pytchley, a village about eighty miles northwest of London, where they shared a common ancestry with the baronets of Isham.<sup>5</sup> His family may have moved to London in the years following the Great Fire of 1666, when thousands flooded in looking for jobs and a better lifestyle. There is no record of his father's occupation, but this was an age of master craftsmen and home-based businesses, decades before mass production would be introduced during the Industrial Revolution.

London was sprawling beyond the walls of the city into the surrounding countryside by the time James was born in 1716. More than 500,000 people lived in three areas – London, the original Roman and medieval city; Westminster, home of the royal palace and the Houses of Parliament; and Southwark, a rural and manufacturing centre south of the Thames River. Major roads connected the three, and another ran west as far as Oxford. James was born in Holborn, outside the walls along the western road, an area of aged wood-frame buildings that had been spared by the fire. Nowadays, Holborn is part of central London, just blocks away from the British Museum, but then James' family had only to walk a few minutes north on Hatton Garden road or Saffron Hill to be out in the country. If they went east along Holborn Road, across the bridge and left into Cow Lane, they would arrive at the livestock market of Smithfield. Some days, coal smoke blanketed the old city in the distance; on others, the sun glinted off numerous church spires.

As a young man with a basic education, his prospects were numerous, but most would have confined him to an office in a bank, a printer's, or a merchant's shop. With more schooling, he could become a physician, a solicitor, or a cabinet maker. If his father had connections, he could work for government or become a petty officer in the Royal Navy. If he had the initiative of an entrepreneur, he could start a business that supported the building occurring in the new areas of the west end, where aristocrats were converting their estate lots into planned communities with central squares surrounded by three-storey terraced brick houses. There were many possibilities for an educated young man, but none offered adventure like a stint overseas with a trading company in India, the West Indies, China, or North America.

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<sup>4</sup> Middle class

<sup>5</sup> John Debrett, 'Isham, of Lamport, co. Northampton' in *The Baronetage of England*, Volume 1 (London: 1824), 104-107.

At age sixteen, James was hired by the fur-trading Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) to serve as a clerk in one of their forts. Perhaps he thought he would work for a few years and return home with a tidy sum to start his own business, as many men had before. He probably didn't plan to stay in North America for twenty-nine years; nor did he expect to die there.



*St. Andrew's Holborn*

*In 1716, James Isham was christened in the Anglican church of St. Andrew's Holborn in a new area of London just west of the old city walls. St. Andrew's still stands, and the main tower is the same as it was when James and his family were parishioners. (image: [http://london.lovesguide.com/andrew\\_holborn.htm](http://london.lovesguide.com/andrew_holborn.htm))*

James was aboard the frigate, *Mary III*, in May 1732 as it prepared to leave. Anchored in the London Pool, a stretch of the Thames River between London Bridge and the Tower, the HBC vessel was dwarfed by other tall ships owned by the richest trading companies.<sup>6</sup> On most days, a forest of masts swayed silently with the changing tides. Water taxis and barges with coal from the north slipped between the massive hulls. The quays swarmed with men loading and unloading cargo; sailors gathered to board their ships. Twice a year, two or three HBC ships could be spotted in the Pool – in May as they left with trading supplies and new recruits, and in September when they reappeared with furs and men returning home.

The *Mary III* followed a familiar route, known since the Company was first granted a Royal charter sixty years earlier - under the Tower of London, down the Thames and out to sea. They sailed along the east coast of England and Scotland until they reached Stromness Harbour in the Orkney Islands, where they took on water, fresh supplies and new recruits. Using only a

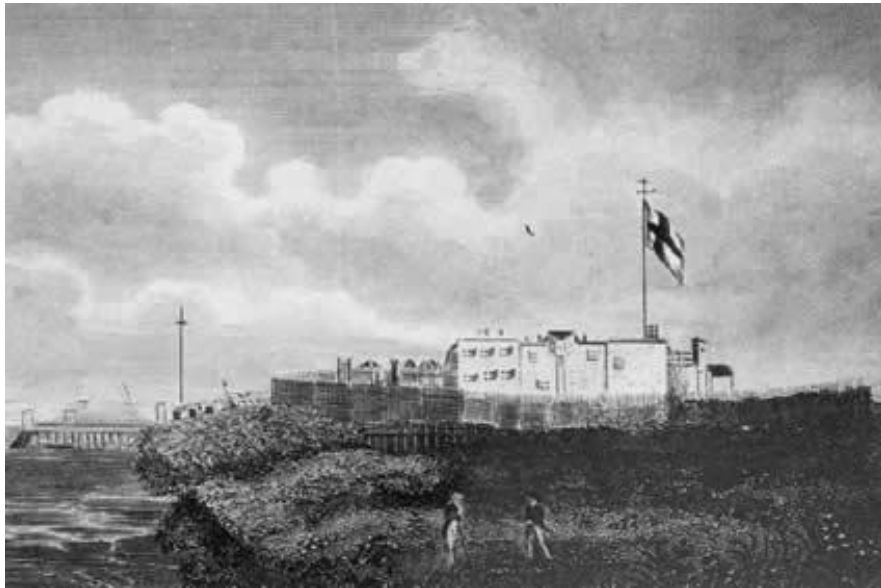
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<sup>6</sup> The ships of the British East India Company, which had received a Royal Charter in 1600, were the largest merchant ships during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Called East Indiamen, a typical ship was 500 tons. The HBC frigates were generally between 120 and 200 tons.



sextant and the stars for navigation, they crossed the Atlantic Ocean until they entered Hudson Strait where the ship dodged blue icebergs and cracked chunks of drift ice for the next 450 miles. Taut in the wind, the ship's lines trembled and hummed as the huge sails struggled with the Arctic air. After several days, the ship turned south into Hudson Bay and followed the western shoreline for more than a week. Finally, they arrived where the Nelson River and the Hayes spilled into the Bay, creating a large island between them. York Fort was on the north shore of the Hayes, about five miles from the sea, but the river was tidal and full of sandbars, so a ship needed to anchor seven miles offshore at Five Fathom Hole and tender men and supplies to the fort.<sup>7</sup>

The voyage took about twelve weeks and the men were so accustomed to the constant motion of the sails and deck that James may have wondered if he could walk on land without swaying. I see him at the railing of the ship, taking a deep breath of frigid air, and climbing down to the longboat and into a new world.



*York Factory*

*Great Britain established a system of factories to conduct business in foreign lands. A 'factory' in North America was often called a 'fort' or 'trading post' and the agent or head merchant was the 'chief factor'. York Factory was built and rebuilt in three different locations. James Isham spent his career at the second York Factory, which is depicted in a painting by Samuel Hearne from the 1770s. (Image: HBCA P-228 N8317)*

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<sup>7</sup> Glyndwr Williams, *Andrew Graham's Observations on Hudson's Bay 1767-1791*, (London: Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1969), p. 250



*The dock at York Factory*

*The ships anchored in Hudson's Bay at Five Fathom Hole and smaller boats transported the cargo and passengers up the Hayes River to the fort. The men of the HBC forts relied on boats for transportation during the summer. The supply ship was generally a frigate-class sailing vessel, which was square-rigged on three masts. A shallop, or sloop, was a large boat with one or two sails that could travel among the forts on the Bay. The longboats were usually rowed by six or eight men, although they could be rigged for sailing, and they were used locally on the ocean and in the rivers.*

*[Image: Historic dock, Schell & Hogan from Picturesque Canada]*

## August 1732 York Fort, Rupert's Land

As clerk and bookkeeper, James worked in the trading rooms and the office of the chief factor, Thomas McCliesh<sup>8</sup>. He recorded the highlights of each day in the fort's journal and kept a ledger of all trade transactions. He wrote letters to the factors of the other forts and helped the chief factor create the annual report to send to the HBC offices in London.

The HBC Committee, which consisted of the Company's governor (chairman) and several major stockholders, directed the actions of the chief factors. The directors never visited Rupert's Land, so they relied on written journals, ledgers and letters, like the reports that James and others sent to London each fall. Committee responses arrived with the ship the following year, as did personal letters from family and friends. Communication was a slow process, so chief factors were expected to make decisions based on their personal understanding of the will of the Committee.

It is through these written records of the Company, now available to researchers in the Hudson's Bay Archives in Winnipeg, that the details of James Isham's life at York Fort can be reconstituted. As well, he took copious notes and made sketches of the natural world and the

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas McCliesh was about fifty years old when James Isham arrived at York Fort in 1732. McCliesh had begun as a carpenter with the HBC in 1698 and had supervised the building of several ships before becoming chief factor at York Fort in 1722.

lives of the indigenous people he met, which he later compiled into a single book of 'Observations' that he sent to the London Committee.<sup>9</sup>

The following excerpt from the York Fort journal of 1732<sup>10</sup> is an example of James' work as clerk.

*1732, August 26th, Saturday. Wind at SSW a fresh gale with clear warm weather. No geese home this day. Brought 75 fish from the nets. Our men that went to the woods on Monday last, came home for provisions. 2 men brewing.*

*1732, August 27th, Sunday. Wind at SW a fine gale with clear hot weather. No fish from the nets and but 10 geese from the Indians. 2 canoes of home Indians came from Fort Nelson and brought 4 buck deer and one canoe came down this river and brought 3 buck deer. Our men that came home yesterday are gone to put more firewood into heaps.*



#### HBC Post Journals

The clerk wrote daily entries in the post journal, a book of about 60-80 pages with a colorful cover. Each hand-written journal was sent to the London Committee on the annual ship along with the furs collected that year. (Source: HBCA; photo: P. Redhead 2014)

<sup>9</sup> HBCA E.2/1-E.2/2 Writings by James Isham; E. E. Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes 1743-49*. (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1949)

<sup>10</sup> HBCA B.239/a/14 York Fort post journal 1731-32

His descriptions of the cold winters provide a glimpse of the challenges the men faced. The wooden window shutters within the fort were closed eighteen hours a day to keep the building warm. Fires were lit in four large brick stoves and, once the wood had burned down to coals, the top of the chimney was closed and stopped with an iron cover. Even so, within four or five hours the inside walls were covered with six to eight inches of ice, which the men cut away with hatchets. Also, three or four times a day they heated twenty-four-pound cannonballs in the fire and hung them up at the windows to fight the incessant cold.<sup>11</sup>

A summer outfit was typical of the style in England, James wrote, which consisted of a coat, a waistcoat, britches, and a cotton shirt. In winter, they combined the best of the Cree clothing with the best of the English. James' notes describe a typical outfit, which included a flannel shirt, good buckskin britches to the knees, two pairs of wool knit stockings reaching up to the crotch, and three pairs of socks. A waistcoat reached to his thigh and, over all of this, a beaver coat down to mid-calf. Often, a man would also wear a beaver cape over his shoulders and tied under his chin. Mittens were flannel on the inside and beaver fur on the outside, so that the wearer could hold them to his face in cold weather. He wore a cloth cap lined with flannel and, in extreme weather, covered his face with a piece of duffel cloth with holes for the eyes and nose. His shoes were of good deerskin, fashioned after moccasins. For added protection, he let his beard grow.<sup>12</sup>

## September 1732 York Fort, Rupert's Land

James had arrived at a busy time. The appearance of the supply ship from London marked the end of one trading cycle and the beginning of the next fiscal year. The warehouses were empty of furs but filled with new trading items and English foodstuffs for the men in the fort. The indigenous people trapped furs during the winter and made canoe trips to the forts in late spring to trade for tobacco, blankets, guns, hatchets, kettles, and other goods. At the fort, the men worked hardest between April and October, trading for furs, packing the pelts for shipment, unloading the supply ship and loading it with outbound cargo. The pace was more relaxed for the rest of the year when the men made trade goods by hand and hunted to supply the fort with food.

The HBC men called the local people who lived in tipis outside of the fort, 'Home Indians' or the 'Home Guard', whereas the people near the fort called themselves Athinuwick, the People<sup>13</sup> (Lowland Cree). They lived on the swampy lands around western Hudson Bay and knew that, if a canoe travelled up the Hayes River, the land began to climb gently, and wetlands gave way to forests. There were no rapids all the way to the Rock (about 125 miles from York Fort), which marked the territorial boundary with their rivals, the Upland Cree. The lands of the Athinuwick extended in a wide strip of marsh along the shoreline as far east as the Rupert River on James Bay and as far north as the Churchill River.

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<sup>11</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, 172-173

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-117

<sup>13</sup> Victor P. Lytwyn, *Muskegowuck Athinuwick – Original People of the Great Swampy Land*. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), chapter one

The Home Guard Cree helped the HBC men survive by hunting local game such as caribou, deer, geese and ducks in exchange for goods. Sometimes, a family would be 'trusted' (given credit) with enough ammunition and other supplies for the winter; in the spring, they would repay the debt at the fort with meat and furs. Cree women were an integral part of the economic life of the fort, trapping small animals, picking berries, carrying supplies, making and mending snowshoes and moccasins, and tending to the children. Everyone got involved unloading the annual supply ship.

As the days got shorter that September and the nights became cooler, the HBC men stepped up their preparations for winter. The sawyer and a few men went west on the river to collect firewood. Another group went east to the marshy shores of the Bay to fish. Still others killed white whales (beluga) which provided lamp oil for the dark nights. Those at the fort picked turnips and collard greens from the gardens.

James likely accompanied the men on the fall goose hunt because he described it in his observations. There were, he said, several types of geese that migrated through the area in the fall and spring, staying three weeks or more in the marshes east of the fort. The Cree hunters knew the white geese (Snow Geese) as 'wappawawewuck', while the English men called them 'weyweys'.<sup>14</sup> The gray geese (Canada Geese) were much larger than the white, very fat, and according to James, 'extraordinary good eating'.

The hunters lived in tents of wood or hide for weeks at a time, some northwest of the Point of Marsh and others across the Hayes River, near Cross Creek and the Fourteens River. The HBC men and the Cree hunted together, using techniques that were blended from both cultures. One strategy was for a man to sit in a clump of brush or wood that was chest high. The hunter, having two guns loaded and ready, would mimic the call of the geese. When he fired, he usually got three or four geese at one shot. Then, he would pick up the other gun and fire again, continuing in this fashion - calling, firing, and loading.<sup>15</sup> Another tactic was to creep through the woods and swamps until the men came upon a large flock, where standing up with their guns at the ready, the men startled the geese so they would 'rise upon the wing' in great numbers.<sup>16</sup>

By late August, which the Cree called *Uppahau-Apeshem*, or the Flying Moon (when the young geese fly)<sup>17</sup>, the goose hunt ended, and many people turned their efforts to the deer hunt. In his notes, James described three sorts of deer: the smallest, like the deer he knew in England; another a little larger; and the largest as big as a horse. Some of what he called 'deer' were really caribou, which migrated in large numbers in fall and spring. Although the meat was welcomed by the traders, the hides weren't traded because they were full of holes from black flies, or 'flesh flies' as James called them, which tormented the animals all summer.

The HBC men prepared, salted and stored the geese and caribou in large barrels, called hogsheads. Cree women used traditional techniques to preserve caribou meat, cutting it into strips, drying it, and pounding it into a powder referred to as *ruhiggan*. In this form, the meat could be stored in bags for a couple of years and reconstituted by adding fat and sometimes

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<sup>14</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, p. 120

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 118

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 84

<sup>17</sup> Lytwyn, *Muskegowuck Athinuwick*, 82

berries. The latter form, called *pemmican*, was common across the plains. Hundreds of miles inland, people used the same recipe to preserve bison meat.

The long cold winter also allowed the men to freeze meat, fish and vegetables but even with this abundance the post journals are filled with comments about their dwindling supplies and the lack of fresh meat. As James put it, life was uncertain and the men lived like princes sometimes, but other times like beggars with not a morsel of fresh provisions. It was 'either a feast or a famine'.<sup>18</sup>

The first hard frost killed the tops of the turnips on September 27, just eight weeks after James arrived at York Fort. It took several days for the river to freeze over, beginning with thick soupy water and loose ice rising and falling with the tide. Suddenly one day, the ice was solid from one side to the other. For the rest of the winter, the men travelled on land and their boats were stored on the bank until the ice cleared in the spring.

By mid December, it was too cold to spend any time outside and the sun was only above the horizon for a few hours each day. The men were likely weary of smoke-filled rooms, board games, and dried fish when on the shortest day of the year the men away from the fort returned for Christmas. They would decorate a tree, drink too much, eat a grand feast, and attend divine service twice in one day. They would sing, dance, play cards, and laugh. They would toast the King and their families back in the old country. There would be warm feelings of well-being and friendship in the fort for a few days, making the rest of the bitter cold winter more bearable.

When the first bald eagles arrived in March, the caribou and geese would not be far behind. The rivers were still covered with ice, so the Cree had taught the HBC men to use a different technique for hunting caribou than during the fall migration. They built a hedge, one or two miles long, with gaps where they fastened sinew snares that entangled the animal when it tried to jump through the opening.<sup>19</sup>

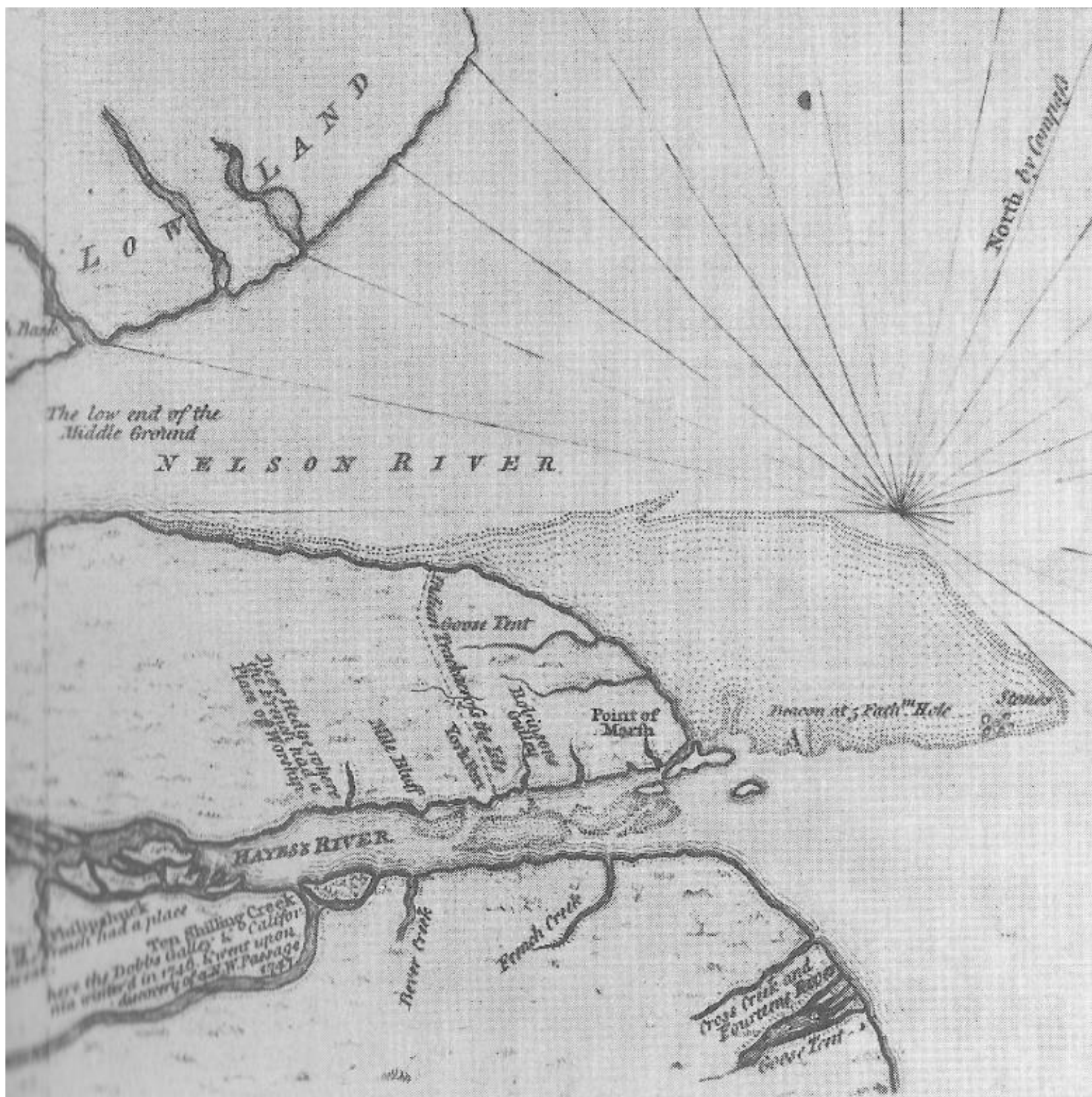
The ice typically cleared from the river in mid-May, but James reported on May 5, 1733, there was 'ice driving up and down with the tide', and the next day the first group of traders arrived with furs. For the next two months, most days were spent trading with groups of Cree and Assiniboine traders from many miles inland.

In mid-July, the chief factor sent men in a longboat to lay the buoys at Five Fathom Hole in anticipation of the annual supply ship. A month later, on August 11, the *Mary III* appeared on the horizon and the fiscal year was over. More importantly for James, this marked the end of his first year away from home. He had learned to fire a gun, to paddle a canoe, and to recognize the signs of an impending storm. He was now used to the taste of venison, the smell of wood smoke, and the sound of geese nesting in the marshes. He knew how to melt snow to get drinking water and how to find his way back to the fort in dense brush. As the new recruits from the ship set foot on the river's edge, it was James who extended his hand in welcome.

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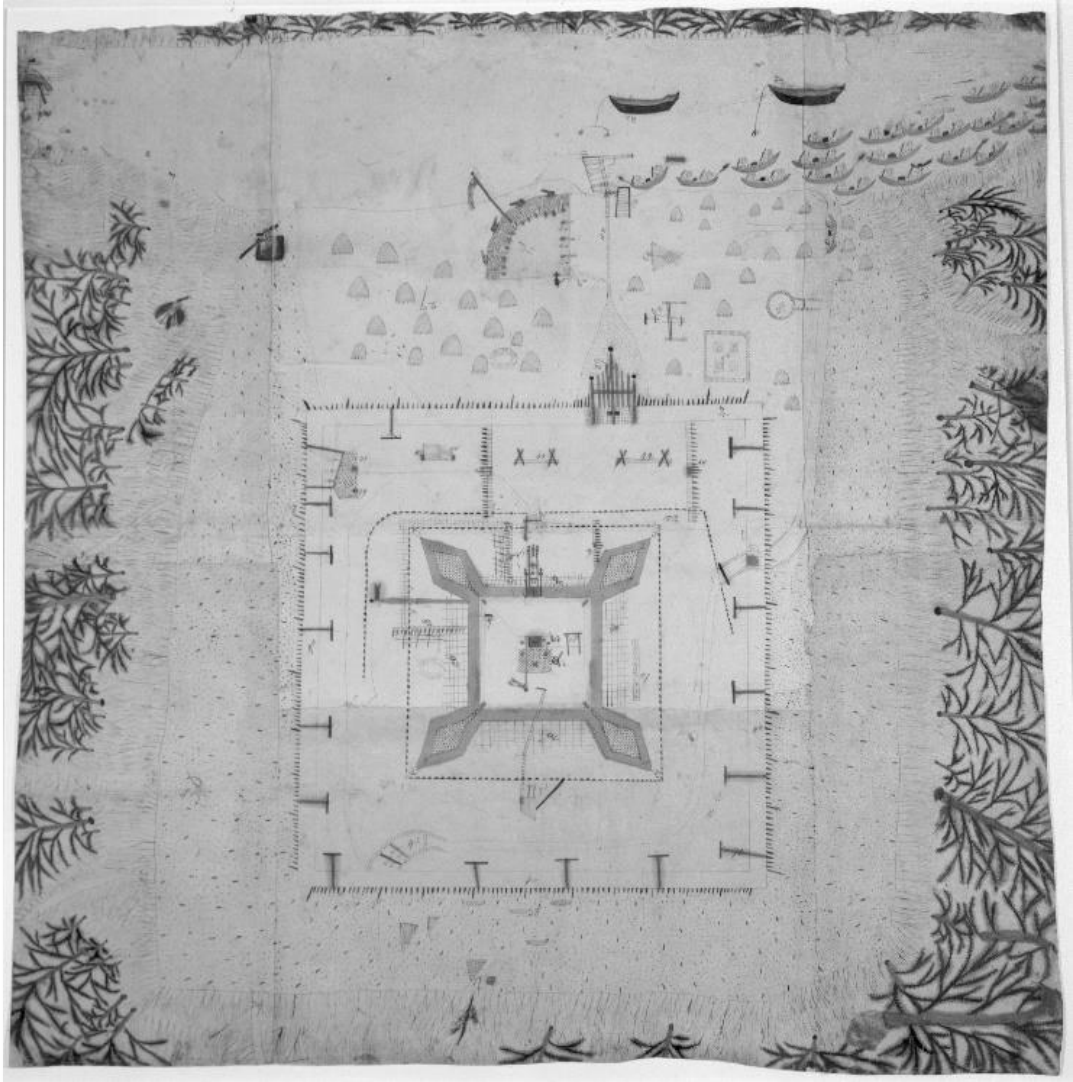
<sup>18</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, 115

<sup>19</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, p. 153. James Isham sketched a deer hedge in his 'Observations'. Sometimes, he wrote, an animal would die at the site, but at others it would get away, hauling the tree attached to the snare.



Robson's Map of York Factory

The Nelson River and the Hayes River enter Hudson Bay in the same general area. The second York Factory, which replaced the original fort in 1714, was built on the north side of the Hayes River because it was considered to be easier to navigate than the Nelson. This map shows details of the local land and water that are mentioned frequently in the post journals. (Map: Joseph Robson 1746, HBCA RB FC 3211 R6, N11900)



*Isham's Plan of York Factory*

*Isham's sketch depicts a moment in time when more than twenty canoes of Cree traders are arriving to trade at York Factory. Tipis of the home guard are pitched between the fort and the river; the gates of the outer palisades and the inner fort are closed. There are two longboats in the river and a sloop in the stream that runs through the grounds. James was more artist than mapmaker, so the evergreen forests that frame the scene appear to be nearby even though they are many miles away. (HBCA G.2/5)*

*The original is stored in the climate-controlled vault of the Hudson Bay Archives in Winnipeg. (photo – P.Redhead)*





## September 1737 York Fort, Rupert's Land

James Isham became chief factor at York Fort in 1737, after five years on the Bay. His success would be measured in terms of profits by the London Committee, but he had likely learned from his predecessors that people – his men, the indigenous traders, and the Home Guard Cree – should be his focus. In the early years, the London Committee had envisioned that the forts would be organized along military lines, with officers and men following clearly defined roles. The relationships were more intimate, however, because to survive the men needed to work together and adapt to life on the Bay. As well, there were so few of them and they were so far away from help and support that they had to become self-sufficient and flexible in the tasks they could perform. York Fort was less like a military fort and more like a British grand house with an upstairs class and a downstairs class. The officers included the chief factor, the second-in-command, the doctor, the clerk, the captain of the sloop, and some of the more experienced tradesmen. The rest of the men were called 'servants'.

All trade goods were made by hand, either in England or at the fort. Skilled tradesmen included tailors, coopers (barrel makers), stonemasons, carpenters, blacksmiths, boat builders and canoe men. Those lacking special skills were designated as labourers. When the Company adopted an apprenticeship system in the early years, men were trained at the forts and it became possible to work one's way up in the hierarchy, as well as socially.

Although they were far from home, many aspects of life in the fort were the same as in Britain. The officers set a fine table with china plates, glass goblets and pewter utensils.<sup>20</sup> They held a church service every Sunday with 'Divine Service as usual', toasted the King and Royal Family on special occasions, and observed St. George's Day, Christmas, and Guy Fawkes Day. One of the chief factor's responsibilities was to look out for the moral and spiritual well-being of the men. There were no clergy at any of the HBC forts, but the Company expected the men to worship regularly as they would have back in Britain and to uphold British values.

James would have understood that he was the leader of a commercial enterprise that earned profits and provided dividends for its investors. This was not a colony and they were not here to civilize the indigenous people or convert them to Christianity.<sup>21</sup> This was business.

June and July were filled with days like the one James captured in his 'Plan of York Fort'. The protocols governing the trading ritual were described by James in his observations and later by another chief factor, Andrew Graham.<sup>22</sup> The spectacle was choreographed by the Cree and Assiniboine leaders who put ashore about two miles up river at a spot that the HBC men could not see. In James' picture of York Fort, there was one captain at the front, flying a British flag in the lead canoe. Three other canoes with principal traders followed, and then came row upon row of canoes, three or four abreast as wide as the Hayes River allowed. They discharged guns

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<sup>20</sup> Arthur S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press), p. 149. "York Fort, as indeed every fort on the Bay, must be thought of as housing a little community of Englishmen living, as far as might be, the life of England under strange skies."

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer S. H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood – Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980), p. xii.

<sup>22</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, pp. 172-173; Williams, *Andrew Graham's Observations on Hudson's Bay*, pp.315-319

to salute the fort, and the cannons at the battery between the fort and the river replied. The Great Flag flew over the fort until the traders departed days later.

The trading captains were invited into the fort where James presented them with gifts and an elaborate outfit, consisting of a red military-style jacket, a white shirt, stockings tied below the knee with garters, a pair of English shoes, and a hat decorated with feathers. Before trading started, the two sides renewed their friendship by smoking the calumet (a long-stemmed pipe). James, as chief factor, and the principal Cree trader sat on chairs while the rest of the entourage sat on the floor around a huge trading table. Several calumets were placed on a pelt on the table, each about six feet long and decorated with feathers. Everyone sat silently for some time until the chief trader broke the silence. He presented a calumet to James, who lit it and proceeded with a ritual known to the Cree long before Europeans arrived. He pointed the small end to the east where the sun rose. There was a low murmur of appreciation from the group seated on the floor.

He raised the calumet above his head, pointing to the mid-point of the day. Then, he dropped it dramatically and pointed to the ground and the setting of the sun. With a final flourish, he turned it over and presented it to the trading chief.

“Ho!” The group erupted in applause. The leader took four whiffs of the pipe and handed it to one of the younger men. One by one, the men each took four puffs until at last the pipe was exhausted.

When the calumets were spent, the chief trader made a speech demanding fair trading. ‘Tell your servants to fill the measure and not to put their fingers within the brim,’ he said. ‘Let us see the tobacco before it’s opened and give us guns with locks that don’t freeze in the winter. Measure the cloth fairly and give us well-made thick kettles.’ There were several exhortations to ‘take pity on us’ (which was James’ translation, but likely meant ‘deal fairly with us’).<sup>23</sup>

The trading room was then opened daily from 5:00 am to 8:00 pm. The trading captains were invited into the room, but others traded through a window at the end of a boarded passage that prevented access to the rest of the fort. The captain talked to his men at the window, received their furs, and now and then carried the goods they had selected to the window in an effort ‘to show his familiarity and consequence with the English’.<sup>24</sup>

When trading was complete about two weeks later, the cannons were fired as the gang departed.

The HBC was part of a North American trade network far bigger than Rupert’s Land, that had been operating for centuries before Europeans arrived. One of the hubs for the northern trade was at the Mandan villages<sup>25</sup> on the Missouri River (at present-day Bismarck, North Dakota). The Mandans lived throughout the year in large round earth lodges, organized around a central gathering space. They cultivated corn and beans, which they traded for horses, dressed buffalo and deer skins decorated with feathers and porcupine quills, and, lately, knives, axes, and

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<sup>23</sup> Rich, *Isham’s Observations & Notes*, p. 85

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Andrew Graham’s Observations on Hudson’s Bay*, p.319

<sup>25</sup> John S. Milloy, *The Plains Cree: Trade, Diplomacy, and War 1790 to 1870* (Winnipeg: U. of Manitoba Press, 1988), 47. The Mandan and Hidatsa villages were in the same general area. Both were agriculturalist trader societies.

kettles from the HBC. They held an annual gathering at which traders exchanged items from as far away as Mexico and the Pacific coast.<sup>26</sup>

The first European to visit the villages was Pierre Gaultier de la Vèrendrye, who was building forts west of Lake Superior while James was still a clerk-writer. As La Vèrendrye pushed inland, he was trying to find the 'western sea' which was rumoured to lie beyond the blank region on early maps. He reported there were about fifteen thousand people in nine villages, which he called Mandans. The Cree called them Ouachipouennes (the Sioux who go underground) and they called themselves Numakaki (many people). They spoke a dialect of Sioux, but the Sioux nation was their enemy.

The Cree and Assiniboine traders who acquired HBC goods at York Fort knew the trade network well. Each year, they returned inland where they spent the winter hunting and trapping along the Saskatchewan River. In the spring, they met the Blackfoot in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and traded some of their HBC goods for more pelts of wolves, beaver, and fox. Then, they turned toward Hudson Bay and began the long journey to York Fort, trading with other tribes they encountered or planned to meet along the way. The Cree and Assiniboine traders were called middlemen, negotiating as they did between suppliers and customers. By the time they returned to the fort the following summer, the middlemen had tapped into the network that included the Mandans, the Blackfoot, and the Saukteaux (at Lake of the Woods, near present-day Thunder Bay, Ontario).

James wrote about the Cree, 'Assinipoets' (Assiniboine), 'Archithinue' (Blackfoot), and other indigenous groups, but there is no indication that he understood his role in the vast Mandan trade network.

## August 1741 Fort Prince of Wales, Rupert's Land

When the ship arrived in 1741, James received new orders sending him to Churchill as chief factor of Fort Prince of Wales. The stone fort was fashioned after the star-shaped military fortresses in Europe and positioned strategically at the tip of a small peninsula on the north shore of the Churchill River estuary. The London Committee intended it to be the first line of defence should the French attack as they had in the early years.<sup>27</sup> It had been under construction for a decade, but the men finally abandoned the old wooden fort and moved in a year before James was posted there. Work continued, however, and most of the forty men under James' command would be stonemasons, not fur traders.

Thomas White, his predecessor and mentor, replaced him at York Fort. White brought other orders telling him to expect two ships that had set off to discover a passage through Arctic waters to Asia. The HBC Committee was skeptical of northern exploration because they had lost a group of men years before along with their chief factor<sup>28</sup>, during an expedition to look for gold and minerals. The Committee ordered James to give the captain assistance if he was

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., chapter 5

<sup>27</sup> In 1694, French forces led by Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville captured York Fort and renamed it Fort Bourbon. Ten months later, the British recaptured the fort. In 1697, the French returned and once more took the fort. This time, they occupied the territory of the Hayes and Nelson River estuaries until 1713 when they were forced to relinquish all Hudson Bay posts to Britain under the Treaty of Utrecht.

<sup>28</sup> James Knight

'brought into real distress and danger of his life or loss of his ship.'<sup>29</sup> They also sent verbal orders telling James not to waste HBC resources on the explorers.<sup>30</sup>

I visited Churchill, one unusually cold summer to see Hudson Bay for the first time. I thought about James Isham as we crossed the estuary in a small black Zodiac while the winds hurled saltwater at us. Beluga whales and their calves slipped silently out of the dark water to breathe before arcing down under the rolling waves. The Bay was immense, so it was impossible to see the far shore. Local people told me that it was as blue as a tropical sea at times, but slate gray at others.

As I stepped onto the rocky shore just south of the stone fort, which is now an historic site, I imagined James arriving with his trunk and cases and the men loading them onto a sledge pulled by a team of horses. Nowadays, there is a half-kilometer-long boardwalk protecting the delicate tundra plants growing in the shallow soil. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this area would have been barren, scuffed clean by the men in the fort and the natives who pitched their tipis beside it. The wooden doors of the stone fort are taller than most modern urban houses. Inside there are the stone shells of a couple of two-story buildings, one parallel to the northern wall and the other directly across the courtyard from it. The rooms that James would have occupied are on the ground floor in the northwest corner of the building, on the left as one enters the fort. The interior stairs at both ends of the courtyard lead to the ramparts where in 1741 eighteen cannons were positioned at intervals facing out to sea; the plans called for twenty-two more. James may have looked out across the Bay and imagined French warships approaching, as I did that day. (They would appear, but long after he was gone.)



### *Fort Prince of Wales*

*The stone fort is a National Historic Site, located across the estuary from the town of Churchill, Manitoba, on a point of land called Sloop Cove. The walls are 12 meters thick and 6.5 meters high. The author spent a week at Churchill in 2015 as a member of a Parks Canada archaeological dig at Fort Prince of Wales. (Aerial view: Wikimedia Creative Commons. Photo – P. Redhead)*

<sup>29</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, li

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, liii

When James reached Churchill, the two exploration ships were already anchored a few miles away at Sloop's Cove where they intended to spend the winter.<sup>31</sup> Two days later, he set off with Captain Christopher Middleton to inspect the site of the old fort, about five miles west.

Middleton was no newcomer to the Bay. He had joined the HBC in 1721, when James was just a boy in London, and within a decade was commanding the Company's newest and largest ship, the *Seahorse*. During his numerous voyages on the annual supply ships, he experimented with sextants, the latest technology that promised to give sailors a reliable method of calculating longitude. He also collected data about variations of the magnetic needle in Hudson Bay that he later published in a series of scientific papers and he had recently been invited to become a Fellow of the Royal Society, an organization that supported and promoted scientific advances. Middleton had jumped at the chance to command an expedition to find the Northwest Passage, going so far as to resign from the HBC so that he could work on the venture.<sup>32</sup>

By the end of the day, James had agreed to house the officers and a few men at the stone fort, leaving eighty-eight at the old fort. He contacted Thomas White at York Fort for winter coats and the services of some hunters because his had left for the winter, but White responded that he had no supplies to spare. In the following months, James sent meat to the old fort several times, but the crew had no experience in the Arctic and soon many were suffering from scurvy and frostbite.<sup>33</sup>

James and Captain Middleton established 'amicable relations'<sup>34</sup>, likely because they shared an interest and curiosity in the natural world. Perhaps the older man taught James to use scientific methods to record his observations; some of their notes about the cold at the fort are so similar that it is obvious that they talked about it at length. It was also good fortune that Middleton had been the one to design the stone fort because James needed to repair the mistakes of his predecessor who had taken shortcuts and altered the original plans. The fort was poorly built, walls were crumbling, and the ramparts were so narrow that the recoil of a cannon would send it backward, hurtling into the courtyard below.

There was conflict between the two men at times over Middleton's generous rations of alcohol to his men and his attempts to recruit some of James' men for the exploration ships.<sup>35</sup> An incident at Christmas forced James to punish his own men for drunken behaviour. Three men were jailed to prevent them 'going away and lying down to sleep by the river'. One was put in irons and, when he escaped, was caught and given twelve lashes. Then, the other two escaped. They were caught days later and given twenty lashes each, as the entire complement of James' men watched 'for a warning to them'.<sup>36</sup> James' disciplinary methods were moderate in comparison to the punishments he had seen in London as a boy. There, people were put into prison because they couldn't pay their debts alongside people who had committed murder; thieves were hanged in public executions; the heads of highwaymen were displayed on stakes to deter others from robbing travellers; adulterers were locked in pillories to be ridiculed by

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, liii

<sup>32</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Middleton, Christopher

<sup>33</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, lvii

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, liv, lx

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, lix

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, lix

passers-by. He could put a man on report, dock his wages, lock him up in prison, thrash him, and, when all else failed, send him home on the next ship.

When the two ships finally got free of the ice in Sloop's Cove and sailed away in July, five of James' men went with them. He reported to London that Middleton had been 'a very troublesome guest'<sup>37</sup>, straining local resources and disrupting his first winter at the stone fort.

## December 1742 Fort Prince of Wales, Rupert's Land

James fell ill for the first time in December 1742 with gout, which he described in the post journal as 'very bad with the pain in my thigh & leg & swelling [swelling] in the grine [groin]'. He was 'not able to walk, not even so much as about the room.'<sup>38</sup> Gout is an inflammatory arthritis that attacks joints, especially the big toes, heels, knees, wrists and fingers. Urate crystals form in joints and can cause kidney stones. Left untreated, attacks occur sporadically and extended periods of gout lead to kidney failure and death.

The men were all home for Christmas and there was more food and drink than they had seen in weeks. James was a temperate man so it's unlikely that he drank too much, although table beer was a staple for everyone. As an officer and chief, he had access to the best foodstuffs, such as various meats, rich biscuits, jellies and puddings. By Christmas Eve, he was in extreme pain. He was likely awakened by a fever, shooting pains radiating up his calf to his knee, and the unbearable weight of the blankets on his foot. By the time the doctor saw him the next morning, his big toe would have been swollen and red.

I have had gout, so I can imagine James sitting on his bed in the stone fort, his swollen leg propped up on pillows, ready to conduct the day's business. He tries to arrange his clothes so that he looks dignified and in command, but he is forced to expose the aching toe because even the slightest pressure causes severe pain. Two women work quietly at the fire, one stirring a concoction of leaves, berries and bark while the other adds fuel to the stove. A tap on the door announces the doctor who enters James' apartment with a flurry of snowflakes picked up by the strong north-westerly wind. He shrugs off his heavy beaver coat and approaches the bed. The two men talk briefly about his current symptoms. The doctor examines his leg, sniffs the urine in the chamber pot, and declares that James will need to remain indoors for a few more days.

Nowadays, medications are available to treat gout and prevent future attacks but, at that time, the surgeon's knowledge was limited. His qualifications would have been typical of the times, a seven-year apprenticeship but not a university education. He provided basic care needed at an HBC fort such as setting broken bones, applying poultices to burns and rashes, and providing an herbal mix for upset stomachs. Like his colleagues in London, however, he didn't know that influenza was spread by viruses, and the only infectious diseases he could diagnose were the plague, measles, and smallpox.

James made a note in the Churchill post journal on February 10 that he was 'intolerable well at present, thank God', marking the end of a six-week period of confinement and pain.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Christopher Middleton

<sup>38</sup> HBCA B.42/a/25, Churchill Post Journal, 1743-01-14


<sup>39</sup> HBCA B.42/a/25, Churchill post journal, 1743-02-10

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To The Honourable  
 The Governour Deputy Governour  
 and Committee of the Hudsons Bay  
 Company London,  
 Gentlemen;

Being in a Disconsolate part of the  
 world, where there is little conversation or Diversions  
 to be had, I was dubious of that too common Malady the  
 Vapours, which is frequently the forerunner of other  
 Distempers, therefore to prevent such if possible,  
 I have in cold Days and long winter Nights  
 amused myself with the following Observations  
 which I have very scrupulously the small part  
 of the following Language, was to be long pursued  
 in North America, the following Vocabulary of the  
 Language which is chiefly spoken here these parts  
 of a small Vocabulary in the Country, is most  
 humbly presented to your honours perusal,

Gentlemen  
 Your Honors most Obedient  
 and Most Humble Servant  
 James Isham



**Isham's Observations and Notes 1743-49**

James compiled his personal notes into several reports that are now important historical documents. He used his work to take his mind off the pain and boredom of an extended period of gout. His opening remarks describe his attitude, which likely helped him to survive at a time when his body had failed him. 'Being in a disconsolate part of the world, where there is little conversation or diversions to be had, I was dubious of that too common malady, the vapours, which is frequently the forerunner of other distempers. Therefore, to prevent such if possible, I have in cold days and long winter nights amused myself with the following Observations.'<sup>40</sup> The 'vapours', to which he refers, was an 18<sup>th</sup> century term for depression. (HBCA E.2/1)

<sup>40</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, 4

His 'Observations' also included an extensive dictionary of 'English & Indian' which listed most of the common words, phrases, and sentences that a trader would need to interact with Cree clients. Among them were words that the HBC men used to describe their symptoms, disorders, or 'distempers': Some of the diagnoses are still familiar – knife and gunshot wounds, colds and coughs, frozen ears – but others are archaic. 'Country distemper', for example, was commonly reported in winter and described as pains in the chest and lungs along with fever, lethargy, and coughing. It likely refers to pneumonia or, in some cases, tuberculosis.

James Isham's original report, *Observations upon Hudson Bay*, is stored in the environmentally controlled vault of the Hudson's Bay Archives in Winnipeg. On one visit to the archives, I read the book James had created and thought about others who had touched its fragile pages - his biographer, E.E. Rich, who had studied it in 1949; and my mother, Verna Redhead, who examined it in 1984 during her genealogy research.<sup>41</sup>

Soon after his illness, James wrote a letter to the HBC Committee asking to return to London.<sup>42</sup> He was twenty-seven years old, ill, and wanted to go home, but the Committee asked him to stay on for three more years and offered to raise his salary. He remained at Churchill for another two years, making progress on the renovations of the stone fort, planning a battery of cannons across the estuary at Point Merry, and working to complete his 'Observations'. His health restored, he settled into a comfortable life.

He had taken a Cree woman as a 'country wife', married not by English clergy but in the local custom of the indigenous people. (Some historians suggest he had two indigenous wives at this time.<sup>43</sup>) The woman lived in the fort with him, although it was against company policy and he wouldn't allow his subordinates to keep their wives within its walls. There is no mention of her in the post journals and her name is unknown. The marriage was likely an arrangement initiated by the girl's father, who would have been an important elder or trading leader who could see the advantage for his people of adding the chief factor to their kinship circle. Alliances like these worked both ways, for the band and for the fort.

James was recalled to London in 1745 to account for his actions during the time Middleton's ships had wintered at Churchill. If the HBC Committee found that he had wasted their resources or treated the explorers poorly, he could be terminated. That wasn't on their minds, however.

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<sup>41</sup> My mother told a story of holding James Isham's 'Observations' without gloves because she was his descendant. I had the same experience years later.

<sup>42</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, 319

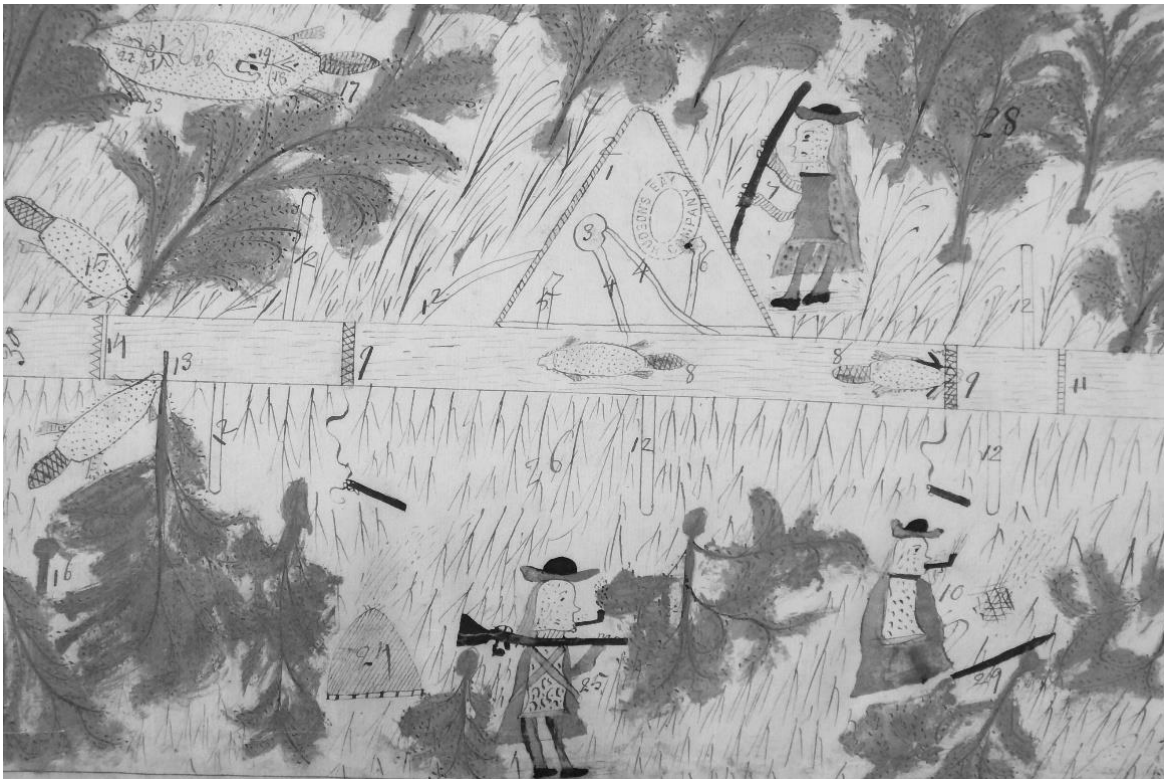
<sup>43</sup> Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, p. 55





### Types of Fur

The indigenous hunters trapped furs in the winter because the pelts were thickest and, therefore, most valuable. In addition to beaver, which was the mainstay of the trade, they also brought in fox, marten, wolf, and others. (photo: P. Redhead)



### Isham's Sketch of Hunting Beaver

James Isham drew and painted this sketch of Indians hunting beaver. In his own words: (1) A Beaver house; (7) a Indian breaking the house op'n with a Chissel, tied to a long stick; (9) netts sett in the Creek with a string and a stick at the End to catch the Beaver as they come out of the house; (10) a Indian sitting by a fire watching a Nett, with a stick by him to Kill them as he hauls them out; (13) a Beaver hawling a tree by the teeth into the water; (15) a Beaver cutting a tree Downe with his teeth, wch. Lean's over the water: (25) an Indian going hunting. (HBCA E.2/2)

## September 1745 London, England

When did James transform himself from a bearded and pungent fur trader to a clean-shaven, scented English gentleman, I wonder? I can see him looking in a mirror, perhaps on the ship or maybe in a London inn, examining the stranger he has become. His dark hair is trimmed in 18<sup>th</sup> century London fashion, his natural curls falling just below his jaw. He is wearing gray breeches buttoned at the knee with white silk stockings and black shoes with a two-inch heel. His black vest and jacket are pulled over a white shirt with ruffles at the sleeves. He is ready to face the men of the HBC Committee.

Hudson Bay House at 3-4 Fenchurch Street was a four-storey brick building with ornamental moulding around the doors and windows. If James walked from Holborn where his family lived, he could be there in half an hour by heading for St. Paul's Cathedral and turning east. He met with the HBC governor, Benjamin Pitt, and the directors in the board room, which according to one eye-witness had a portrait of Prince Rupert hanging on the wall.<sup>44</sup> The Prince had been a favorite cousin of the King when the HBC charter was signed in 1670, and the first governor of the Company. The corporate seal, or coat of arms, would have been displayed in a prominent place, such as the lobby. The logo of the present-day HBC retail stores, with images of beaver, fox, and moose, is much the same as when James worked for the Company.

James had been summoned to help the Committee plan their next response to Arthur Dobbs, an Irish landowner and member of parliament, who was mounting another expedition to find the Northwest Passage. His first two attempts had failed, one funded by the HBC in 1737<sup>45</sup> and Middleton's recent voyage out of Churchill supported by the Royal Navy. Since then, Dobbs had been attacking the HBC and Captain Middleton in a pamphlet war, claiming that the captain had been influenced by his former employer which was more interested in maintaining their monopoly than finding the mythical passage. The captain responded in kind, refuting Dobbs' claims. When the Navy lost interest in the politician's crusade, taxed by the demands of a new war with France, he turned to Parliament where he had considerable influence. In 1745, the Northwest Passage Act was passed, offering a reward of £20,000 to the successful discoverer. Dobbs began recruiting investors immediately and the HBC Committee recalled the chief factor who had recent experience with such explorers, James Isham. James met with the Committee several times in the following months, accounting for his generous treatment of Middleton and discussing a better strategy for dealing with the next group to demand aid from the forts on the Bay.

While in London, he submitted his *Observations & Notes*, finished during his time at Churchill, and delivered more than thirty stuffed specimens to naturalist, George Edwards, who was working on a book about unusual birds. His *Observations* were accepted at HBC headquarters but there is no evidence that anyone read them.<sup>46</sup> No turned-down corners. No notes scribbled in the margins. Perhaps it was because the Committee was distracted by the explorers who posed a challenge to the HBC Charter, or by the war with France that blocked

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<sup>44</sup> Deidre Simmons, *Keepers of the Record: The History of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), p. 150

<sup>45</sup> Arthur Dobbs had persuaded the HBC Governor to send a ship to study the tides north of Churchill in the channel between the mainland and Southampton Island.

<sup>46</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, lxvi

their markets and required HBC ships to travel in convoys. Or, perhaps things got lost during the change in leadership when the Chairman died and was replaced by a new governor. Whatever the reason, James' *Observations* and 'Indian vocabularies' were ignored, and historians were unaware of his contributions to science or his significance as a leader during the early fur trade era until his work was published 200 years later.<sup>47</sup>

James would have spent time with his family on this visit, which was his first since leaving as a recruit in 1732. His father had died in 1738 just as James completed his first year as chief factor and, since then, he had been sending an allowance to his mother and sister.<sup>48</sup> His brother, Thomas, was now the head of the family.

James left London in May, bound for York Fort where he would resume command as chief factor. The ship stopped as usual at Stromness harbour in the Orkney Islands, but the scene was different this time. Because of the war with France, merchant ships avoided the English Channel and, even in the remote waters off northern Scotland, an armed escort was required. There were several ships in the convoy, one sailing to Antigua, one to Boston, and one other HBC ship with fifty men under orders to protect the forts on the Bay<sup>49</sup>. The two exploration ships were also there, heading to the coastline north of Churchill. James had no reason to think that he would ever see them again once the convoy separated in safe waters.

## August 1746 York Fort, Rupert's Land

James returned to York Fort after five years at Churchill and in London. He was settling into the routine of a fort preparing for winter when two ships were spotted at Five Fathom Hole along with four small boats making for the mouth of the river. He was under orders to 'be always on your guard' because Britain was at war with France and Spain. He was prepared to 'fire point-blank upon any ship' that didn't make themselves known, and these hadn't signalled, nor were they flying flags. James would claim later, when criticized for his treatment of the ships, that he thought they were enemies.

He called the fort council together and they prepared for a battle. First, the shipwright took six well-armed men out to cut down the buoys and beacons. Then, James sent a group to load the cannons facing the river, and he armed the men. By 3:00 that afternoon, the ships could be seen flying English flags, but James was still cautious because warships had been known to disguise themselves until the first shots were fired.<sup>50</sup> The captains of the two ships would later admit that they hadn't announced their arrival by sending a boat to the fort as protocol required.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Stuart Houston, Tim Ball and Mary Houston, *Eighteenth-Century Naturalists of Hudson Bay* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), p. 41

<sup>48</sup> HBCA A.1/34, A.1/35, A.1/38, A.16/30

<sup>49</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, p. lxxxii; p. 203 (footnote 2)

<sup>50</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, lxxxiii

<sup>51</sup> William Moor had worked on HBC ships alongside his cousin, Christopher Middleton, and left the Company with him in 1741 to command one of the exploration ships that had wintered in Churchill. James knew him from that time but also from the vitriolic publicity campaign that Dobbs had conducted later in London. Moor had turned against his cousin and changed his mind about the likelihood of a Northwest Passage when Dobbs recruited him as an investor and as commander of the next voyage. Francis Smith had been Master of the Churchill sloop while



Whooping Crane

*When George Edwards published A Natural History of Uncommon Birds (1750), he acknowledged James' contributions. Isham's "commendable curiosity", said Edwards, had led him to "make a Collection of all the Beasts, Birds and Fishes of (the area of Hudson Bay)...The Furs of the Beasts, and the Skins of the Birds were stuffed and preserved very clean and perfect...and brought to London in the Year 1745."<sup>52</sup> The four-volume set of books was used by Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish botanist, physician and zoologist who was developing for the first time a system of naming animals in Latin. In the definitive species list that he compiled in 1758, twelve had been collected by James and painted by Edwards. Among them were the Great Blue Heron (*Ardea Herodias*), Whooping Crane (*Ardea Americana*), Sandhill Crane (*Ardea Canadensis*) and Purple Martin (*Hirundo subis*). 'Unfortunately for Isham, although his specimens were among the first to receive binomial Latin names by Linnaeus himself, they were collected before it was fashionable to name new species after the collector. There are no species named ishami, and few modern ornithologists have even heard his name.'* (Houston, p.44; image-Edwards)

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James was chief factor and, as such, was a member of the council. He had travelled north along the coast several times, trying unsuccessfully to establish trade with the "Eskimos" (Inuit), but this was the extent of his experience commanding a vessel.

<sup>52</sup> Houston et al., *Eighteenth-Century Naturalists of Hudson Bay*, p.45

James kept two notebooks during the next ten months, one was the ordinary fort journal and the other documented the actions of the captains. This was prudent because he would need the second one later to refute many of the claims in a report the explorers published upon their return to London.

The captains intended to settle down for the winter, just as Middleton had done at Churchill. James tried to convince them to winter on the Churchill River where the ships would be safer from the ice during spring break-up, but they insisted on staying and soon the ships were moored in Ten Shilling Creek, about four miles inland from the fort. James allowed them to store some of their supplies in the cooper's shed and the warehouse, but the rest were piled on the shore with two sailors standing guard. He worried that the explorers would trade with his clients, especially located as they were on the river upstream from the fort. Although he elicited promises from the captains, he also stationed a couple of men to keep watch near the houses they built for the winter.

By March, the ships had been at York Fort for seven months (and would remain for three more). James wrote a letter to the captains complaining that their men had given alcohol to some Cree men in exchange for two pairs of snowshoes, which they needed for their families. One captain responded by denying the incident and insisting that he was not accountable to Isham, but only to his employers in England. He also demanded fresh provisions and threatened to 'plant his men on both sides of the river' so that no one, English or Indian, could approach the ships. To this, James replied that the ships lacked provisions because they came ill-prepared and called the explorers 'pirates and robbers'. I will always endeavour, James wrote, to assist the oppressed and distressed so far as I am able.<sup>53</sup>

Tension had been building from the beginning between the two captains. It began with petty bickering as one man accused the other of not sharing the partridges the hunters delivered. Two weeks later, one demanded silence and posted a guard of four men with drawn swords. Then, the other captain moved out of their house and into York Fort, hoping it would lead to reconciliation. Two days later, the first man accused Isham of encouraging the other to leave.<sup>54</sup> Throughout this time, James tried to mediate the disputes. 'It's a surprising thing that these Gentlemen cannot be easy by themselves', he wrote in his journal, 'but they must endeavour to bring me into it which I hoped to avoid by my Steady adherence to them both.'<sup>55</sup> It's no wonder that he had gout again that year, possibly exacerbated by stress.

*1747, June 24 – A fine breeze at WNW till noon, then squally with rain at times. At 6:00 this morning, the ships weighed anchor and sailed from Five Fathom Hole. At 11:00, bore NEN from the Fort when we lost sight of them.*<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Rich, *Isham's Observations & Notes*, 291

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 281

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 283

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 308

## October 1748 London, England

Arthur Dobbs' dream of a Northwest Passage collapsed when the exploration ships returned without any evidence that it existed. The explorers' benefactor was determined to win against the HBC, however, so he changed tactics and began a campaign to challenge the charter of the HBC in the British parliament. James was recalled to London for the second time in three years to assist the HBC Committee.

The parliamentary committee began to collect evidence, including affidavits from all of those involved. The HBC was required to provide business documents and financial accounts that had never been shared with the public. James wrote a rebuttal to the explorers' accusations of ill treatment at York Fort, and was added to the list of people who would testify when the committee report was presented to Parliament.

James testified before the Committee of the Whole House, where all the members of the House of Commons witnessed his interrogation. The transcript of his testimony shows that he was questioned about his treatment of the recent explorers, but also on aspects of the Company that Dobbs had been criticizing – that the HBC clung to the shores of Hudson Bay rather than building forts inland, and that they had mistreated the Indians.<sup>57</sup> When asked about the feasibility of setting up forts one hundred miles inland, he replied, 'I believe it is not practical. If a Fort was so many miles up, the cost of carrying goods backwards and forwards would be prodigious.'<sup>58</sup> Then he was asked, 'Were any attempts ever made to civilize Indians? Or any chaplain ever sent?' James responded, 'Every man prays for himself.'

The motion before the House would have opened Rupert's Land to other traders, but it did not pass. The HBC Committee continued to have critics, however, especially among the investors who had supported Arthur Dobbs (who had by this time retired from the fight). Rumours spread that they intended to challenge the HBC charter again by sending ships to trade in the Bay, thus provoking a court challenge. The Committee decided that the Nelson River, about twenty miles from York Fort on the other side of the island, must be defended. They sent orders for a small outpost to be built there. Called Flamborough House, it would be a satellite of York Fort and help to gather provisions for both posts. Then, they appointed James as master of the new fort.

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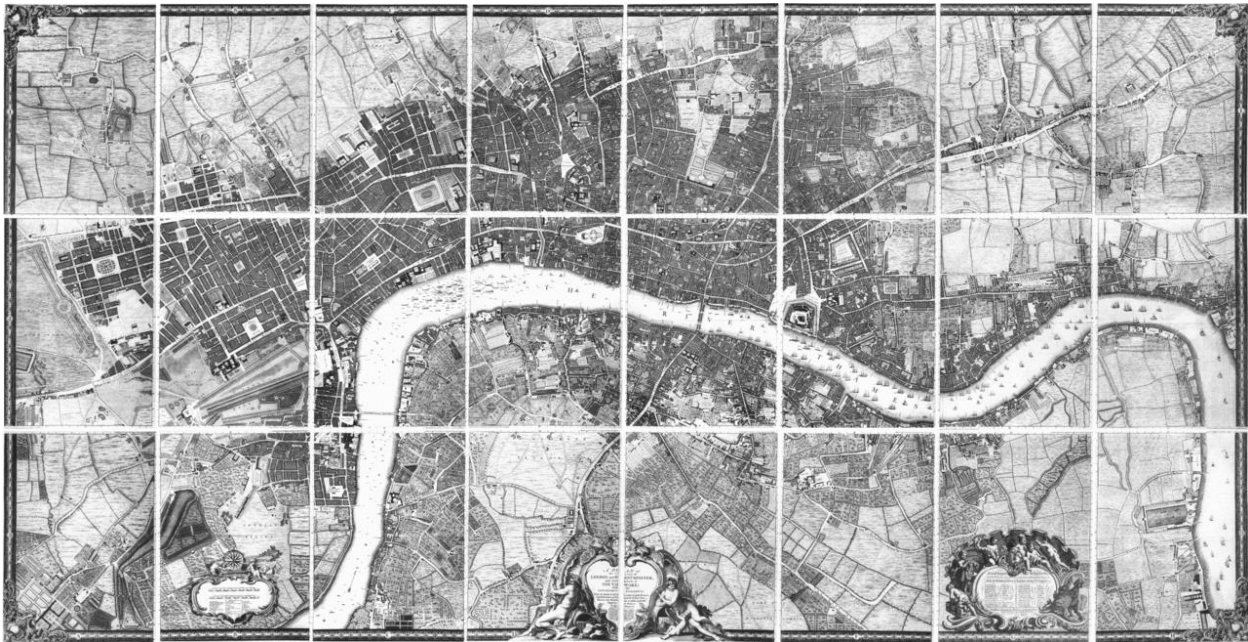
<sup>57</sup> Transcript of James Isham's testimony to Parliamentary Committee 1749, HBCA E.18/1 fos.195-199

<sup>58</sup> HBCA E.18/1 fos. 195-199



*Houses of Parliament, London*

*The Palace of Westminster is home to the Houses of Parliament in England. James testified before parliament in 1749, several decades before much of it was destroyed by fire in 1834. ('Print of Houses of Parliament before 1834 Fire' by J. Shury & Son, Printed by Day & Haghe)*



*Greater London 1746*

*The population of London in the mid-eighteenth century was about 650,000. There were three areas, London, Westminster, and Southwark (south of the Thames), but they were already beginning to merge into one large city. The second bridge, at Westminster, was not completed until 1750. (map: John Rocque 1746)*

The parliamentary inquiry spanned several months, so James spent almost two years in London. He married Catherine Mindham two weeks after arriving, perhaps as one historian speculated, because the HBC was vulnerable to public criticism at the time.<sup>59</sup> No doubt he knew her, perhaps from his childhood or maybe they had met on his previous trip to London. They married at St. Martin's-in-the-Field, Westminster, and lived at #11 Bennet Street, near Storey's Gate in Westminster. By spring, they had a daughter.<sup>60</sup>

We'll never know if James considered settling down in London or not, but on May 20, he boarded the *Prince Rupert III* to return to the Bay, leaving behind his wife and infant daughter. James arrived at York Fort in August 1750 to find that the chief factor had drowned and his second-in-command, Sam Skrimshire, was in charge. Skrimshire was James' cousin and they had joined the HBC about the same time.<sup>61</sup> He had served at York Fort from 1744-46 and James had reported that he was a 'very sober diligent young man'. Even so, his recent master had complained to London that he was lazy and uncooperative. James brought orders that Skrimshire was recalled for questioning. The council at the fort had the authority to appoint a new chief in such circumstances, so James was once again master at York Fort.

Flamborough House was small, about thirty feet on a side, and surrounded by a stockade. (James made a map of it a few years later that also showed a battery of cannons on the riverbank.<sup>62</sup>) Its primary purpose according to the Committee was 'to prevent interlopers from doing us any damage'<sup>63</sup>, but the antagonists' ships never arrived so its mandate was not clear. Sam Skrimshire, having convinced the Committee of his worth, returned the next year and became master at the new post.

James treated the outpost as a provisioning centre for York Fort and issued orders that all trade in furs must be re-directed to the main fort. Skrimshire suffered James' wrath on at least two occasions when he accepted furs at Flamborough – once in payment of a debt and another when Cree traders refused to proceed to York Fort because of bad weather.<sup>64</sup> Messages between the fort and the outpost document a relationship between James and his cousin which, despite his earlier praise, became increasingly acrimonious. The two quarreled over poor goose hunts, spoiled meat, and the number of men assigned to Flamborough House. The cause of this conflict is unknown, but it became so problematic that in 1753 the London Committee suggested

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<sup>59</sup> Brown, *Strangers in Blood*, p. 55. "Possibly its [the Company's] vulnerability to public criticism was urgently relayed to Isham; only a few days after his return to London in October 1748 to testify on the company's behalf, he was married to an English woman."

<sup>60</sup> Mary Lillys Isham was christened at Saint Martin in the Fields, Westminster on 17 September 1750. 'England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975', database, FamilySearch.

<sup>61</sup> James Isham's mother was Ann Skrimshire. His cousin, Sam Skrimshire, joined the HBC in 1733, the year after James arrived on the Bay.

<sup>62</sup> James Isham's map of Flamborough House, HBCA G.1-100

<sup>63</sup> HBCA A.6/8 fos. 15, 15d

<sup>64</sup> Scott Stephen, 'Assistant to York': *The Ambiguous Role of Flamborough House, 1749-1759*. Manitoba History, no. 62, Winter 2009



that the post be closed. James left it open, however, until 1759, four years after his cousin died there accidentally.<sup>65</sup>

James had been involved for more than a decade defending the HBC against the various challenges mounted by Arthur Dobbs, but by 1754 when no 'interlopers' had appeared, he must have realized that the threat was over. Even so, there were other concerns. The number of furs taken in at York Fort was in steep decline and a new strategy was called for.

## June 1754 York Fort, Rupert's Land

Throughout most of James' career, French traders from the St. Lawrence River area had been pushing west into Rupert's Land, but it was only recently that they had affected his trade. When James was a new recruit, arriving for the first time at York Fort, Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Vérendrye had entered the region west of Lake Superior and established his headquarters at Lake of the Woods.<sup>66</sup> By the time James was in his second year as chief factor (1738), la Vérendrye had built two forts south of Lake Winnipeg – Fort Rouge (at present-day Winnipeg) and Fort la Reine (at Portage la Prairie). The following year he built three forts on the Saskatchewan River route.<sup>67</sup> La Vérendrye died while James was in London to testify before parliament (1749) and control of the French trade passed to others who continued to follow the route from Lake Superior through Rainy Lake and Lake of the Woods to Lake Winnipeg. By the time James returned from London (1750), he began to recognize signs that the French traders were nearby – the middlemen brought fewer high-quality furs and some had trade items acquired from the French.

In June 1754, James sent the first of several groups of men inland to encourage the Blackfoot to come to the Bay to trade. Each trip would contribute to the HBC's understanding of the rivers and lakes that were the canoe routes of the traders and, for the first time, develop the skills of their own servants in paddling, portaging, and trekking in the vast Northwest. Anthony Henday, the first to journey inland, was accompanied by a 'trustworthy Indian' and a young man who had lived with the Blackfoot.

A year later, Henday returned at the head of a trading flotilla of forty-six canoes with tales of horses, mountains, and French traders. In the months to follow, James transcribed Henday's journal and submitted it to the HBC Committee. Two things became clear as he studied the explorer's notes. First, the extent of the Cree/Assiniboine trading network was vast and distant tribes had no need to travel to the Bay themselves. On the return trip, Henday encouraged his entourage to hunt along the way. Wolves were numerous, but they refused to kill them while in Blackfoot territory. Henday persisted in trapping wolves himself but was given a stern warning, 'An Indian told me that my tent-mates were angry with me last night for speaking so much concerning trapping & advised me to say no more about it, for they would get more wolves,

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. Sam Skrimshire died May 18, 1755, after being struck on the head in an apparent accident. No one was charged.

<sup>66</sup> La Vérendrye's headquarters were Fort Saint-Charles at Lake of the Woods. He had also built Fort Saint-Pierre at Rainy Lake in 1731.

<sup>67</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Pierre Gaultier de Varennes et de la Vérendrye. The forts on the Saskatchewan River route were Fort Dauphin (on Lake Manitoba), Fort Bourbon (on Cedar Lake), and Fort Paskoyac (the Pas).

beaver, etc. from the Archithinue Natives [Blackfoot] in the spring than they can carry.’<sup>68</sup> Soon, they had purchased great numbers of furs and he reported, ‘We are above [more than] 60 canoes and there are scarce a gun, kettle, hatchet, or knife amongst us, having traded them with the Archithinue Natives.’

The second lesson from Henday’s journey was that the French-Canadians were already integrated into the trading network and posed a serious threat to the HBC. Henday noted, ‘It is surprising to observe what an influence the French have over the Natives’, wrote Henday, ‘I am certain he hath got above 1000 of the richest skins.’ He described the advantages of their long, shallow canoes which could carry large loads and yet were light enough to portage easily around rapids. ‘The French talk several languages to perfection’, he added, ‘They have the advantage of us in every shape; and if they had Brazil tobacco, which they have not, would entirely cut off our trade.’

Although Henday had little success in convincing new tribes to travel to York Factory, he became the first European to have been so far west and to have seen the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains. James continued to send men inland after 1754. In all, HBC servants made nine trips during his time, each group travelling inland, wintering among the indigenous people, and bringing large groups of trading partners to York Fort in the spring.<sup>69</sup>

By July 1758, James was satisfied that his new strategy was working. What may not have been evident was the effect that the Seven Years War, now in it’s fourth year, was having on the competition. For the past two years, the French traders in the Northwest had been short of gun powder and other trading supplies because the war had disrupted travel between Europe and Montreal. The Cree and Assiniboine middlemen responded by increasing trading activities with the HBC.

Some events were not recorded in the post journals, but we know that James had a son in 1754 because he would later name him in his will, Charles Thomas Isham.<sup>70</sup> It would be safe to say that James didn’t attend the birth; men didn’t in those days. His country wife, an unnamed Cree woman, had likely moved out of their rooms in the southeast bastion and into a tipi with her Swampy Cree family a few days beforehand. Elder women would have attended his wife, encouraging the birth with prayers and smudges of sweetgrass smoke. I can see the head emerging, black hair slicked back with fluid and the baby being placed on the woman’s bosom for the first time.

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<sup>68</sup> Germain Warkentin (ed), *Canadian Exploration Literature* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2006), 121. Henday’s journal, Dec 28, 1754

<sup>69</sup> Joseph Waggoner, half-breed son of Rowland Waggoner who had been chief at Albany several years earlier, made three trips inland with Joseph Smith. The “two Josephs”, as James called them, were the first English men to travel the route that would later become the standard one from York to the interior; the first to describe a buffalo pound; and the first to penetrate the Assiniboine River region. Henday would travel again to the Archithinue in 1759-60 with Joseph Smith but there is no record of the trip.

<sup>70</sup> Will, Public Record Office, The National Archives of England, Prob 11/884, Image 181

All I know for certain about my sixth great-grandmother is that she had a son with James Isham while he was chief factor at York Factory. Her name has been lost<sup>71</sup>, and even if the HBC clerk had recorded it in the post journal, it would have been changed to Mary or Ann or some other English name selected by her husband. It was against official HBC policy to consort with Indigenous women, so James declared their relationship only once in his will.

If my Cree six-times-great-grandmother was anything like my grandfather's sisters, she would have been a joker and a tease. Laughing. Eyes smiling. James described young Indigenous women as 'frisky'. Was she unpredictable? Flirtatious? Did she make him laugh?

I doubt if she was the shy maiden depicted in movies, with downcast eyes and a quiet voice. She was, after all, selected by the elders to marry the chief factor. She was likely confident, proud, and able to represent her people as an ambassador in the foreigners' world. She may even have helped James with some of his important decisions, offering unique ways to look at problems. I like to think that she was an independent woman, selected for her strength and beauty to be the wife of the chief factor. Perhaps some of her traits can still be seen in the strong women of my family.

My Cree ancestor would have resembled others in her extended family. I imagine her standing five feet one inch tall with dark coffee skin, brown eyes, and straight black hair pulled into a single braid falling to her waist. She was probably between fourteen and twenty years old; whereas James was a mature thirty-eight. Indigenous women of the time, James wrote, wore a mixture of traditional leather and British fabric, differing only in their adornments. A fabric smock hung loosely from the shoulders to mid-calf, stitched up both sides to form a loose rectangle and tied together with shoulder straps. Sleeves were tied on with strings so that they could be added or removed as needed. Sometimes a woman wore a breastplate over the smock, ornately decorated with glass beads, porcupine quills, brass, and other trinkets. In the winter, she wore a vest made of beaver or deer with the hair on the inside for warmth. Over it all, she draped a woolen blanket or a fur robe, tied loosely at the shoulder.

Her life in the fort was not one of idle privilege. She was a contributing member of an HBC outpost in which survival was an ongoing challenge. Most of the traders' country wives spent long hours making moccasins and snowshoes. She may also have hunted small animals for food, but she would not have cooked for James; that chore was left to the English and Orkney cooks. She didn't eat with the men, either. The women and children ate separately according to the military-style traditions of the fort and in keeping with the culture of her indigenous kinfolk. As the wife of the chief factor, she likely was shown respect by the men.

I wonder what future my six-times-great grandmother envisioned for their son. There were, according to James' own observations, numerous children with mixed Cree-British ancestry living near the fort. Some had been abandoned by their fathers when the men returned to England or Scotland, and a few had left on the annual ship to go to school in London. Did she plan to keep her child connected to her parents and kin, to teach him to be a skilled Cree man?

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<sup>71</sup> An error on a private genealogy website claims that Charles' mother was named Ruhiggan, but that is a misinterpretation of a sentence on page 57 of Jennifer Brown's book, *Strangers in Blood*. I wrote to her for clarification and she confirmed that Ruhiggan was not James Isham's wife.

When the ship arrived in 1758, James learned that he had been granted a furlough. He gave the keys of the fort to his second-in-command, boarded the ship and left behind his country wife and four-year-old son, Charles.

James spent six months in London, sorting out the affairs of his English wife who had been moving from place to place, according to his letter to the Committee, incurring extra charges that his 'income will scarce allow'. He must have spent time with his eight-year-old daughter and perhaps he talked with his brother, Thomas, about his desire to have Charles educated in England when he was a little older. James returned to York Fort on the next ship. Catherine died a few months after he returned to North America. The cause of her death is unknown, as is the fate of his young daughter.

## December 1756 York Fort, Rupert's Land

The year James turned forty, his health began to fail. Ever since his time at Churchill when he was confined to quarters with gout, he had experienced the same symptoms every few months. In December 1756, he began to pass kidney stones. In his own words, he was 'taken violent bad with the gravel' and a few days later he 'passed a stone as large as a pea'. The pain continued until just before Christmas, when he 'passed five small stones.' Finally, the agony subsided.

By late January, the pain returned and, over the next few days, James passed six stones on Sunday, five stones on Monday, and ten later that week. He sent for his assistant, Andrew Graham, to return to the fort because he couldn't even hold a pen. He was in distress for the rest of March, with 'stones daily coming away with gravel of a red colour' and 'violent bad of the gout'.

James called his condition 'gout', but was that an accurate diagnosis? I consulted a physician and showed him the chronology of symptoms James had logged in the post journals. He agreed that he had gout, but later episodes of passing kidney stones and blood were classic signs of kidney failure.<sup>72</sup>

James had gout again at Christmas 1760. By late January, Andrew Graham was conducting the daily business of the fort because James was too ill to work. Gout and kidney stones plagued him every day that winter and, on April 5, 1761, he made his final note in the post journal – 'Extremely bad, have not been right well since 16<sup>th</sup> November, having been troubled with the gout upwards of 20 years & growing in years, the country will not do.'<sup>73</sup>

On April 13, Graham wrote, 'at 5 this evening Mr. James Isham departed this life after a long sickness to the great grief of us all.' He was only forty-five years old. In his will, dated February 16 of the previous year, James left everything to his seven-year-old son, Charles Thomas Isham.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Interview, Dr. Bob Gordon

<sup>73</sup> HBCA B.239/a/49 York Fort Post Journal 1760-61

<sup>74</sup> Will, Public Record Office, The National Archives of England, Prob 11/884, Image 181. Some sources refer to Charles Thomas Isham as Charles Price Isham, which is incorrect. Confusion was caused by the failure of the original executor, surgeon John Price, to act.

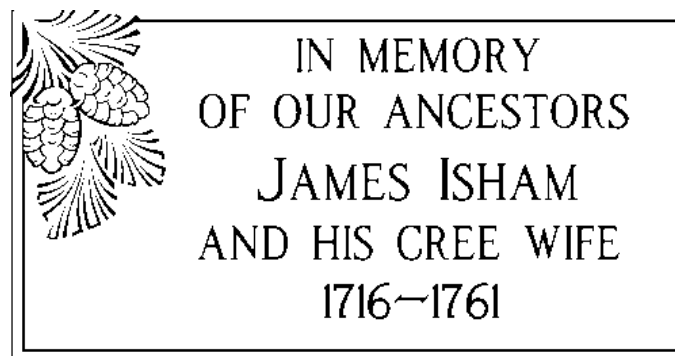
Graham set the flags at half-mast and sent men out to bring the HBC servants home for a funeral. The following Sunday, after the sermon and a twenty-one-gun salute, six tradesmen carried the coffin out of the fort.

In June, Graham had a tomb built 'for the memory of my late worthy friend.' James' Cree wife grieved, as he described in his 'Observations', by letting her hair down so it hung about her face in a careless manner and eating alone for several days. The drums of the Cree outside the fort were slow and solemn.

Months later when word reached England, the men of the London Committee likely had a moment of silence for one of their own, a reliable gentleman with twenty-nine years of service to the Company.

There are no photographs of my six-times-great grandfather. No paintings or sketches. No notes in HBC correspondence describing him. Perhaps James Isham was a little like my brothers or my grandfather. I can account for my own attributes - my English father's eyes, my Danish grandmother's height and long fingers, my mother's strong jaw. Does a hint of James Isham remain, I wonder, perhaps in a dimple, or the timbre of my voice, or a gesture? A clear picture of him began to emerge when I read his notes and journals, examined his sketches and paintings, and studied the challenges he encountered in everyday life at the forts. I began to see the man through the decisions he made, the relationships he nurtured, and the thoughtfulness with which he approached the natural world. I am content to know him through his character.

I wish that I could stand before James Isham's grave and tell him that his legacy of descendants and observations survives, 250 years later. The fort and the graveyard no longer exist, however. Twenty years after his death, the French destroyed York Fort during the American War of Independence and the HBC built a new one a few miles away. Since then, erosion has eaten away at the old site until nothing remains. It has all washed away into the waters of Hudson Bay.



*Memorial Headstone*

*Our family installed this headstone at St. Paul's Lindsay Graveyard in 2015.*

NAME: ISHAM, James PARISH: St. Andrew's, Holborn, London ENTERED SERVICE: 1732 DATES: b. 1716; d. 13 April 1761

Appointments & Service

| Outfit Year*:                                    | Position:  | Post:                | District: | HBCA Reference:  |
|--|--|----------------------|-----------|--|
| <i>*An Outfit year ran from 1 June to 31 May</i> |  |                      |           |  |
| 1732   | Travelled to Hudson Bay on <i>Mary III</i>                             |                      |           |  |
| 1732-37  | Writer & bookkeeper  | York Factory         |           | A.11/114, fos. 65, 69;<br>B.239/a/14-19                            |
| 1737-41  | Chief factor   | York Factory         |           | A.11/114, fo. 81; B.239/a/20-22                                    |
| 1741-45  | Chief factor   | Fort Prince of Wales | Churchill | A.11/13, fos. 70-87;<br>A.11/114, fo. 104; B.42/a/23-25<br>E.2/1-2 |
| 1743   | Compiled his notes into<br>'Observations on Hudson's Bay'              |                      |           |  |
| 1745   | Returned to London   |                      |           |  |
| 1746   | Returned to Hudson Bay   |                      |           |  |
| 1746-48  | Chief factor   | York Factory         |           | A.1/36<br>A.11/114, fo. 123<br>B.239/a/28                          |
| 1748-50  | Returned to London; testified before Parliament                        |                      |           |  |
| 1750   | Returned to Hudson Bay   |                      |           |  |
| 1750-58  | Chief factor   | York Factory         |           | A.11/114, fo. 160; B.239/a/34-43                                   |
| 1754   | Sent Anthony Henday inland<br>to bring distant tribes to the fort      |                      |           |  |
| 1758   | On furlough in London  |                      |           |  |
| 1759-61  | Chief factor   | York Factory         |           | B.239/a/47-48  |
| 1761   | Died of kidney failure<br>following years of gout<br>and kidney stones |                      |           |  |

Vital/Genealogical:

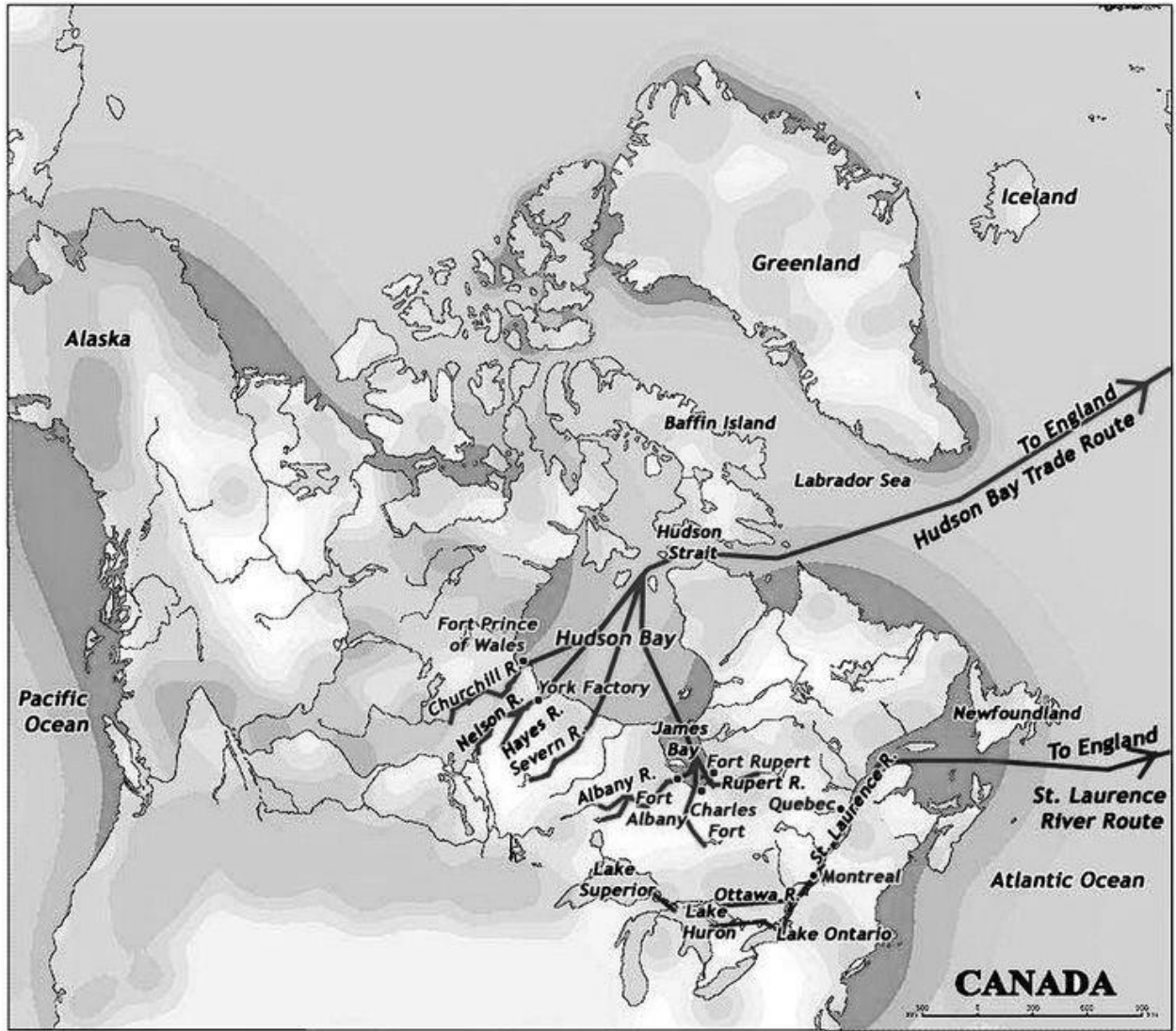
Parents: Whitby Isham and Ann Skrimshire (DCB, vol. 3)  
 Siblings: Thomas Isham, Ann Isham  
 Wife: Catharine Mindham, m. 1748 in London (DCB, vol. 3)  
 Children: Mary Lillys, christened 17 Sept. 1750 at St. Martin in the Field, Westminster, London England  
 Wife: Unknown Cree woman  
 Children: Charles Thomas Isham, b.1754 at York Factory; d.1814 at London (named in will of James Isham, Public Records Office, The National Archives of England, Prob. 11/884)



1732-1761

*James Isham served the HBC for 29 years at two locations – York Factory and Fort Prince of Wales. (HBCA Biographical Sheets – Isham, James)*

## Chapter Two: Charles Thomas Isham (1754-1814)



*Fur Trade Routes to England*

*After 1760, all furs were destined for markets in England because France no longer had territory in North America. The HBC had the advantage of a shorter overland trek to the ships that arrived annually at York Factory than their rivals who delivered their furs to Montreal. Even so, the traders from the St Lawrence Valley developed an efficient system of depots, such as Fort William on Lake Superior. Thus, competition between the two sets of fur traders increased throughout Charles Isham's career.  
(map – Canadian Geographic)*



## April 1761 York Fort, Rupert's Land

Charles Thomas Isham was seven when his father died. He and his mother likely moved out of the chief factor's rooms in the southeast bastion within days of the funeral. Whether they remained within the fort or went to the tips of her kinfolk is unknown, but his mother was not the first indigenous woman to face these circumstances. Others before her had married another Company man or taken a Cree man as a husband. Charles would typically have stayed with his mother, but his father had other plans for the boy. James wanted Charles to go to school in London.

A succession of chief factors who took over at York Fort in the next two years followed through on James' wishes. Andrew Graham had been clerk at the fort before Charles was born and as James' health failed had become assistant to the chief factor. His entries in the post journal show that he hoped to succeed James but instead he was sent to a new fort on the Severn River. Humphrey Marten who had also served with James was the next temporary chief factor, but he was recalled to England within a year and then assigned to Fort Albany. Finally, Ferdinand Jacobs took charge. He had been at Churchill for several years but at fifty with thirty years on Hudson Bay was concerned about his health. Soon after his arrival, he complained in the post journal that many native families of the men were living within the fort. It was like 'the worst Brothel House in London', Jacobs wrote. It was true that James had relaxed the rules in recent years, but Jacobs was disingenuous in criticizing him since he too had a country wife and two children. Graham, Marten, and Jacobs each worked to send Charles to England and all three men would meet him again when he returned to the Bay as a young man.

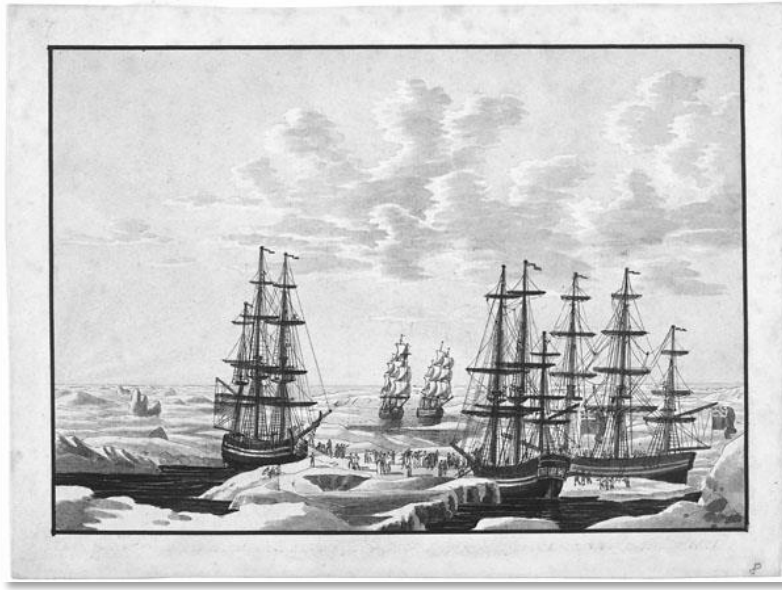
If Charles lived in the fort during this period of transition, he would have been expected to earn his keep. Even at seven years old, there were jobs he could do, such as clearing out the winter debris from the fort, helping the cook serve meals to the men, and cleaning goose feathers collected at the spring hunt. Maybe he cared for the pigs or fed hay to the small horse that his father had brought back on his final sojourn in London.<sup>75</sup>

Meanwhile in London, the directors of the HBC Committee corresponded with Charles' Uncle Thomas about the boy's future. Finally, two years after his father's death Charles boarded the ship to England. This was an unusual opportunity, one granted to few native sons of HBC men.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> There were no horses at the fort in those years, but one is mentioned in the fall 1760 post journal. Later, after James Isham died, the carpenter reportedly built a cart for the horse. It was likely from the Orkney Islands, a small horse like a Shetland pony.

<sup>76</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Isham, Charles Thomas



*HBC Ships in Hudson Strait*

*Charles Isham left York Factory on September 9, 1763, on the HBC frigate King George II. He arrived in London on November 5.<sup>77</sup> (image – Peter Rindisbacher)*

## November 1763 London, England

The first images of London that Charles would have seen were from the ship as it travelled up the Thames River to the center of the city. Gray stone-and-brick buildings lined the banks, some as big as the entire fort back home. In the distance, there was a bridge spanning the river and on it tiny figures like toy soldiers in a child's game. Several ships were anchored in the London Pool, each awaiting its turn at the docks to unload cargo from distant countries.

In the following days, Charles would settle into his new home with the family of his uncle Thomas. He would soon have grown accustomed to the hard pavement and cobblestones of the streets, the smell of coal dust and human feces, and the clip-clop of horses' hooves. He may have marveled at unfamiliar things, such as a tall church steeple or the smell of an exotic spice in the market. Perhaps there were times when he caught a glimpse of someone familiar, but among the hundreds of people he passed every day, there was never anyone who knew him.

Charles probably attended a free grammar school for boys. There was no national system of education<sup>78</sup> so what was taught varied from school to school. The emphasis was on reading, writing and arithmetic, although in some of the more enlightened schools, science was also taught. In most settings, rote learning was the only teaching method and students chanted facts in unison and copied Bible passages into their journals. Charles was likely an able student because years later his writings would show that his penmanship was good, and his grammar was excellent.

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<sup>77</sup> Houston et al, *Eighteenth-Century Naturalists of Hudson Bay*, Appendix A

<sup>78</sup> It would be another 80 years before Britain adopted a national system of education.

Childhood in London was risky. By this time, the population had increased to about 700,000 and the environment was not healthy. More than half of all children died before they reached the age of fifteen<sup>79</sup>. They were viewed as small adults and were expected to work to help the family survive. Among the very poor, boys as young as six became chimney sweeps, clambering inside the flues to scrape away soot. There was no time to play.

Did Charles fit in well with the other boys at his school, I wonder. His skin was probably darker, and he spoke Cree as well as English, but London was filled with newcomers, most speaking Welsh, Irish, Scottish, or northern English dialects. Some spoke French as well as English because their parents were Huguenots who fled religious persecution in France in the previous century. Charles likely adapted quickly to life in London although he would have longed for York Fort. Venison, blueberries, snow, and fresh air. Northern lights. His mother.

Charles was in England when the Seven Years War came to an end. George III had become king in 1760 and had immediately started to negotiate peace with France and Spain. Because of the treaty signed in 1763, France relinquished its territories and withdrew from North America. Britain claimed most of what is now eastern Canada and part of present-day USA, from the Atlantic coast to the Mississippi River. Spain took possession of all land west of the Mississippi, a vast area called Louisiana. The HBC continued to govern Rupert's Land but their competitors in Montreal were now also British subjects, trading into the same markets. These changes in fur trade relationships would affect Charles' career, which would be very different from his father's.

Also, in 1763 the King issued the Royal Proclamation which continues to influence indigenous land claims to this day. It forbade all settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. The intent of the Proclamation was to regulate colonial expansion and to stabilize relations with the indigenous people who had in large part been allies of New France. Although it did not apply to Rupert's Land, the Royal Proclamation had an impact on the HBC because traders from Montreal required licenses and could not return to the Northwest easily. By the time Charles returned to the Bay in 1766, however, the eastern traders had started to reappear in the hinterland west of York Fort.

## September 1766 Fort Severn, Rupert's Land

When Charles boarded the HBC ship to return to Hudson Bay, Ferdinand Jacobs was also on board, returning from furlough. By chance or possibly by design, Jacobs, who was master at York Fort when Charles left for England, was the one to see the boy safely home where he would continue his education as an apprentice fur trader.

Charles was posted to a small fort south of York Fort where the Severn River entered the Bay. He knew the chief factor, Andrew Graham, who had been his father's assistant and had made the funeral arrangements when James died. It's likely that Graham tutored the boy, teaching him how to write the post journal and record transactions in the ledger, just as he had for his steward, William Tomison.

Little is known about Charles' life as an apprentice at Severn, except through proximity to daily events recorded in the post journal. The fort was relatively new and small, with apartments

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<sup>79</sup> Maureen Waller. *1700: Scenes from London Life*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000) p. 62

for twenty men. There was warehouse storage for 2000 furs and an outer stockade surrounded the buildings and a turnip garden. A couple of tipis were pitched outside the walls. Life at the fort was familiar, with routines that his father would have recognized, beginning each fall with the arrival of the supply ships from London. The Cree and Assiniboine middlemen still brought furs to the Bay-side fort every spring, although trading patterns were about to change.

Graham provided a glimpse of what life was like for Charles and the other men at Severn in his journal, 'Observations on Hudson's Bay', written in a manner like James Isham's observations. 'A regular watch is kept', Graham wrote. 'It is set at eight hours p.m. and has three reliefs, each staying three hours, which brings five hours a.m. when the people are called up. In winter there are only two men in each watch to take care of the fire and lights; but in summer three, and in time of trade, when a large number of natives are drunk on the plantation, there are four or five, some of which constantly walk on the ramparts, and give notice to the officers of any annoyance, appearance of any vessel in the offing, or arrival of canoes of Indians.'<sup>80</sup>

The men were provided with so much food, according to Graham, that 'the major part of the people cannot use all their allowance.' Each mess of four men received provisions that included salt pork, salt beef and bacon from England; Cheshire cheese, oatmeal, butter, vinegar and oil; flour for bread; and local fish and flesh (geese, deer, ptarmigans, beaver, hares, ducks). The men 'are forced to give it to the natives, it being more than they can eat. The Orkney servants yearly send home to their wives and children flour that they store up against the arrival of the ship.'<sup>81</sup>

Graham's recent stint as acting chief at York Fort during Jacobs' furlough, made him aware of the return of their old competitors from Montreal. The canoes that arrived that year reported that the best skins had already been traded to parties of French-Canadians. Graham sent proof to the London Committee of their rivals' return – a shirt and a piece of flannel – and complained that the master at York Fort ignored his concerns. When he returned to Severn, he sent men inland to bring the natives down to trade, but with little success. Only three canoes returned with his emissary, Tomison. The others refused to make the trek because it was more convenient to trade in their own territory with the voyageurs from Montreal. He sent Tomison away again the next year with the same result.

Graham was convinced that the HBC would have to build posts inland on the rivers leading to the Bay if they were to remain competitive, an idea that James Isham had proposed years earlier. He finally had his chance to pitch the idea to the London Committee in 1772 when he was again acting chief at York Fort while Jacobs was on leave. For the next two years, the HBC directors debated this major change to their business model. When they eventually decided to move inland, it would shape Charles' career.

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<sup>80</sup> Williams, *Andrew Graham's Observations on Hudson's Bay*, 298

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 296

## June 1774 York Fort, Rupert's Land

Charles was almost twenty when he was selected to lead one of three groups of canoes taking supplies inland for a new fort. He had completed his apprenticeship with a mix of skills that Ferdinand Jacobs, master at York Fort, was looking for in the first men that would establish the Company deep into indigenous territory. Charles was “a strong, good working, sober lad”<sup>82</sup>, Jacobs wrote to London, skilled at using canoes, able to navigate in unfamiliar terrain, and accurate with a gun. He was literate, fluent in English and Cree, and able to do simple arithmetic. Perhaps Jacobs also selected the boy to be among the twelve going inland because he continued to feel responsible for James Isham's son.

Samuel Hearne would be master at the new fort, so he set off first with a carpenter, eight HBC men, and two local Cree men. Hearne had proven that he was tough and resourceful a few years earlier when he explored from Churchill to the Coppermine River, a round trip of roughly 1300 miles completed in eighteen months. Hearne was well-organized and confident, but his careful plans would be upset by the unexpected.

Charles left the day after Hearne with the second group of canoes, heavy with provisions and trading goods for the post. His companion was Isaac Batt, an Englishman who had served the HBC for twenty years and knew the wild areas to the northwest better than anyone. The rest of the paddlers were Cree men who had been trading furs at York Fort when they were recruited to help. As Charles left, the third group of canoes was being loaded so they could leave the next day.

At that time of year, the Hayes River was cold and fresh, bursting with spring runoff. The first strokes of a paddle would make no headway against the current but soon the men would settle into a regular unbroken rhythm, interrupted only when they stopped to rest or to portage the canoes around a dangerous stretch of water. The landscape changed as they pushed inland, from the wind-ravaged trees of the coast to leafy Aspen and dark green Spruce trees intermingled with small saplings where the winter ice scoured and scratched the riverbank during spring break-up.

Days later, when the men and their precious cargo reached Cedar Lake, north of Lake Winnipegosis, they pulled over to rest. The scene was no doubt like those of my childhood when we camped at northern lakes. The tops of the spruce trees swayed and sighed in the breeze, the largest bows creaking like the deep bass of a pipe organ in a cathedral. Mosquitoes and black flies buzzed. A raven screamed.

Suddenly, Charles and Isaac Batt were robbed and abandoned by their Cree companions. How did they feel, I wonder, alone and without a canoe or supplies? They probably built a crude lean-to from fallen tree branches, collected a few edible plants, and contemplated ways to catch a fish with their bare hands. They were found the next day by the third group of canoes, led by Matthew Cocking, who had recently spent a year exploring as far west as the Eagle Hills (south of present-day Battleford, Sask.). The two groups continued together, expecting to find Hearne's group already busy building a fort. But they would be delayed again when their guides refused to go in that direction, where many people were ill. Charles and Cocking had no choice but to winter with the Cree at Witch Lake (Good Spirit Lake, Sask.)

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<sup>82</sup> HBCA A.11/115: fo.137; Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Charles Thomas Isham

Meanwhile, Hearne had selected a site at Pine Island Lake after consulting with local Cree chiefs. The post, which he named Cumberland House, was so well-situated that it still exists as a community today. In the first weeks, the men prepared for winter by constructing log tents and a temporary warehouse. Hearne expected the pit saw to arrive any day with Cocking's canoes but by August, he had heard nothing of the two groups with the rest of his supplies. "Tho' we have spoke with several Indians from all quarters since our arrival in these parts", he wrote in his journal, "I can get no intelligence of Mr. Cocking, Isaac Batt, and others."<sup>83</sup>

Charles made a second attempt the following year to deliver supplies to Samuel Hearne at Cumberland House. "All the goods sent with him came safe", Hearne noted in his journal, but once again Charles had trouble with the Cree men he recruited to help. Several left the group at the first portage out of York Fort, and two more canoes left him days later at Basquia. He was forced to hire other men along the way to complete the trip.<sup>84</sup>

Charles' first two trips inland emphasized the challenges the HBC would encounter as it developed the capacity to work inland after 100 years on the shores of Hudson Bay. The Company had few canoes and almost no one to paddle or navigate. For now, they were dependent on the Cree and Assiniboine for these skills, but the indigenous people were unwilling to divert their energies for long from their own needs. If someone of Matthew Cocking's experience could not convince the Cree men to complete the trip to the new fort, it's not surprising that Charles would be deserted along the way. He proved, however, that he could solve unexpected problems and survive in unfamiliar places.



*Cumberland House 1774*

*Cumberland House was the first post built inland by the HBC. In the first weeks, Hearne's men prepared for winter by constructing log tents caulked with moss and a temporary warehouse, 29' by 14'. Permanent buildings were created later using post-on-sill construction in which vertical posts were mounted on sills (rather than embedding the posts in the ground). The upright posts created a frame that was filled by shorter vertical logs. No nails were used. A stockade was then placed around the buildings and grounds to create a fort. (image: Franklin Arbuckle, 1951, HBC Heritage)*

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<sup>83</sup> HBCA B.49-a-1-008 Samuel Hearne, Remarks on Cumberland House

<sup>84</sup> HBCA B49-a-2 Samuel Hearne, Remarks on Cumberland House

Cumberland House was positioned to become an important depot where traders could deliver their furs and pick up provisions and trade goods. It was situated at the intersection of three canoe routes, one leading to the Saskatchewan River in the west; another to the Sturgeon-Weir River in the north; and one to Lake Winnipeg to the east. It was a natural gathering place for indigenous people and a rendezvous point for the traders from Montreal on their long treks to and from fur country.

The HBC's competitors from the east were not considered to be a serious threat at this time because they were still recovering from the disruption of the Seven Years War. When Britain won the war, most of the original Montreal brokers who had provided the traders with supplies and sold their furs to European markets returned to France. Businessmen loyal to Britain, mostly Scots from New England, Detroit, and Lake Michigan, moved in and set up new companies that traded into the same British markets as the HBC. The traders continued to be French-speaking voyageurs from families that had long experience in the Northwest. It would be several years before the power brokers and voyageurs would coalesce into a single company, but for now it was every man for himself. Sometimes a few groups of these independent traders would band together for a few months, but otherwise they competed against both the HBC and other traders from Montreal. One of these loose partnerships arrived at Cumberland House soon after Matthew Cocking, who had rescued Charles the previous year, took over as master. (Hearne had been reassigned to Churchill where the chief factor had died.) Cocking greeted the group of thirty canoes and 130 men 'with civility but as unwanted guests'. The next day, the voyageurs dispersed to locations that disrupted the trade of the HBC for the rest of the season.

Charles had several encounters with the French traders in those early years inland. In 1775, Cocking sent Charles and Robert Longmoor, both expert canoe men, to spend the winter with a Cree tribe on the south branch of the Saskatchewan River. There, they were to make canoes for Cumberland House. They returned to the fort the following spring with only two, however, because traders from Montreal convinced the Cree builders to sell four canoes to them.

Perhaps Charles spoke about injustice with his Cree cousins who told stories of French traders taking their furs by force. The story is incomplete, but it's known that the French accused him of inciting the Cree to rebel. When two traders disappeared, presumably killed by their clients, they threatened to murder Charles for "instilling bad notions into the minds of the Natives".<sup>85</sup> A few years later, they threatened Charles again. "Well beloved by the Indians and talks the language exceedingly well", an HBC officer wrote, "the Canadians have an exceeding peak against Charles Isham but had better hurt any other Englishman as his death would be revenged by both the English and Indians."<sup>86</sup>

The Montreal traders continued to push further west and north into new fur country. In 1777, Peter Pond became the first to prove the potential of the Athabasca region, returning from the north with so many high-quality furs that he had to leave half of them in a cache to retrieve later. He had gone as far as the western edge of Lake Athabasca, which nowadays straddles the Alberta – Saskatchewan border. The lake is 176 miles long and in some places thirty-one miles wide, the largest in both provinces. The north shore is rough and rocky; along the south-east shore active sand dunes extend for sixty miles. The lake is fed by the Athabasca River,

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<sup>85</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography - Charles Thomas Isham

<sup>86</sup> Philip Turnor, surveyor

beginning in the Rocky Mountains and entering the lake on the south-west side. From the lake, water flows north to the Arctic Ocean by way of the Slave and Mackenzie Rivers. Pond's route took him north from Cumberland House to La Loche (or Methye Lake), across a difficult portage to the Clearwater River, and then west to the confluence with the Athabasca River. There, at present-day Fort MacMurray, bitumen-covered sand oozed out of the riverbanks. He continued north to the lake, as would many traders in the coming years following the same route.

Although the HBC leaders at Cumberland House and York Fort understood the significance of this untapped area, they had too few men to mount a challenge. Instead, they decided to build an outpost in buffalo country at a place on the Saskatchewan River further west than their French rivals. Robert Longmoor and a group of men, including Charles and Isaac Batt, left Cumberland House in September 1778. Winter came early that year and they stopped at a French trader settlement several miles short of their destination. Their competitors offered the HBC men a house for the winter, a gesture that demonstrated their common challenge. Survival.

The next year, Longmoor's men built Hudson House about 230 miles upstream from Cumberland House. In no time, their French competitors built nearby. This pattern of building posts further and further inland, each time leapfrogging their rivals, would define the rest of Charles' career.

By 1781, the Company was ready to send men to Lake Athabasca to face the competition from Montreal. Their timing couldn't have been worse.

## December 1781 Hudson House, Rupert's Land

The smallpox virus arrived with a group of Northern Ojibway.<sup>87</sup> What's thought to be the first large-scale epidemic in the Northwest, may have originated in Mexico and spread along indigenous trade routes.<sup>88</sup> "The smallpox is raging all round us with great violence, sparing very few that take it," wrote the master at Hudson House, "We have received the news of above 9 tents of Indians within here, all dead, the tents left standing and their bodies left inside unburied. ...the Indians lying dead about the barren ground like rotten sheep, their tents left standing and the wild beast devouring them."<sup>89</sup> It's impossible to know how many people died in the smallpox epidemic but some estimates put it between 50% and 65% of the Indigenous population.<sup>90</sup>

Charles contracted smallpox at Hudson House, the only HBC servant reported to be ill. At first, he likely thought he had influenza. His joints ached; he had a fever and a cough. And then, a rash appeared, and he felt a blister inside his mouth. Was that when he knew he had smallpox, or was it later when a spot erupted on his neck? He was cared for by the other men and, perhaps because he was a healthy young man of twenty-eight, he recovered.

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<sup>87</sup> 'Smallpox: Keep Out of this House', Canada's History, Feb/Mar '15, p. 33

<sup>88</sup> Victor P. Lytwyn. *Muskegowuck Athinuwick: Original People of the Great Swampy Land*, (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2002), p. 162

<sup>89</sup> Dr. C. Stuart Houston and Dr. Stan Houston, "The first smallpox epidemic on the Canadian Plains: In the fur-traders' words." *Can J Infect Dis* 2000; 11(2), p. 114

<sup>90</sup> Ted Binnema, "With Tears, Shrieks, and Howlings of Despair" – The Smallpox Epidemic of 1781-82, Alberta Formed – Alberta Transformed. (Edmonton: U of A Press, 2006), p. 117



None of the European-born men became infected. Many may have had natural immunity acquired over generations of exposure, or perhaps the HBC had immunized the men before they left for North America. Since the mid-1700s, the British had used variolation, a method in which a live virus was introduced through a scratch.<sup>91</sup>

The response of the HBC leaders to the epidemic has been praised by modern medical experts. William Tomison was inland master of the HBC at the time and Matthew Cocking was the chief factor at York Fort. Both Tomison and Cocking understood that smallpox was contagious. They stopped its spread in July 1782 when six canoes arrived at York Fort with furs to trade. Three of the Cree were sick, so they isolated them and quarantined the fort. The surgeon sent the Home Guard Cree away, and the men disinfected the furs with sulphur powder and aired them in the sunshine. They burned the men's clothes and possessions. Because of their efforts, none of the people at York Fort were infected.

Twenty years after this epidemic, Edward Jenner developed the world's first smallpox vaccine. Fifty years later, during an epidemic in 1837-38, the factors at several forts used this new vaccine on their local employees and indigenous clients.

As the epidemic waned and the extent of the devastation to indigenous people became evident, the HBC men must have thought about the viability of the business. There was another threat on the horizon, however, that would compound their woes.

Tomison and the men at Cumberland House loaded the canoes with the few furs traded that year and went to York Fort as usual. The annual ship arrived on schedule and soon his group set off with a load of new trading supplies for the coming year. The next day, the silhouettes of three ships appeared on the horizon at York Fort. The enemy ships were French, commanded by the Comte de Lapérouse, a naval commander who had recently helped defeat Britain in the American War of Independence. Lapérouse, motivated by revenge for the recent loss of New France to Britain, had 250 troops and forty gunners on three ships, with a total of 146 cannons. Days earlier, he had destroyed the stone fort at Churchill where Samuel Hearne, with only thirty-eight men, had surrendered. Within hours of arriving at York Fort, the chief factor surrendered, and the fort was destroyed. The French ships continued south to Fort Severn, taking more prisoners before setting sail for France.

The following summer, Tomison went to York Fort again. He and his men waited for a month beside the rubble and debris that had been York Fort, wondering if the HBC ships would ever return. The Company had lost three forts after a year in which many of their clients had died of smallpox. Suppose the Committee decided to declare bankruptcy? Perhaps they would send ships to collect the men remaining in Rupert's Land, after which they would let the HBC Charter lapse. Over time, independent traders would move in and soon the HBC would be a distant memory.

Just one week after Tomison left the blackened remains of York Fort to return to Cumberland House, the *King George III* arrived with enough men to rebuild and staff the fort.

Charles had lived through the smallpox epidemic but now he faced a difficult winter in a fort without enough supplies. The HBC and their competitors collected few furs that year and the HBC men were reduced to begging for supplies from their rivals.

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<sup>91</sup> 'Smallpox: Keep Out of this House', Canada's History, Feb/March 2015

Something else threatened the very existence of the HBC at that time. By 1784, the independent traders from Montreal had coalesced into a single concern, called the North-west Company (NWC). The Nor'Westers, as their men were called, built Fort Chipewyan on the western edge of Lake Athabasca. It was the main depot for the NWC traders in Athabasca country and the furthest point west from the offices of the fur brokers in Montreal. It was also outside of the scope of the HBC charter; no longer in Rupert's Land. The rivers flowed to the Arctic rather than to Hudson Bay and, here, the HBC had no jurisdiction.

## October 1788 London, England

In the mid-1780s, Charles continued to enjoy some of the comforts of an English gentleman even though it had been two decades since he had been in London. He sent a request to the HBC Committee for bedding, shirts, neck cloths, a laced hat, and cotton cloth to make breeches. Two years later, in August 1788, he left for London on the HBC ship, *King George III*.

There are no records of Charles' time in London, so we can only speculate and wonder what happened to him. He was thirty-three, an experienced fur trader with several near-death experiences on the rivers and in the bush. What pulled him back? His uncle Thomas was fifty-five or sixty now; his cousins were in their thirties and raising their own families. Was that enough? Did family make him yearn to return to London? Or, did he simply want a vacation, to relax in the warmth and luxury of a well-appointed home?

He stayed in the new neighbourhood of Bloomsbury, so called because the streets were laid out around numerous garden squares. It bordered on the northern edge of Holborn, where his father had been born and he had gone to school. Perhaps he took an apartment or boarded with a widow who let rooms.

If he entertained thoughts of staying longer, he may have searched for a job, going daily to a nearby coffee house, hoping to connect with a gentleman looking for an able clerk or manager. Perhaps he had rehearsed what to say to convince the man that his only experience, as a fur trader, could translate into skills for the job.

The following spring, he boarded the HBC ship and returned to York Fort. The city disappeared in the distance, a layer of coal smoke sitting heavily over it all. Perhaps, he wondered if he would ever return.



*York Factory at Third Location*

*When the ship arrived at York Fort, the chief factor was building a new fort half a mile further up the Hayes River, to replace the one that Charles had lived in as a young boy. This new fort would meet the Company's changing needs as a warehouse, a shipping port, a manufacturing center, and an administrative hub. The main building, which is all that remains today at the York Factory National Historic Site, was a large wood-frame two-story structure, part warehouse and part dwelling. Several small buildings "included workshops, storerooms, supply sheds, dwelling, cook and mess rooms, a powder magazine, and a distillery." There were gardens and a small pasture and, surrounding it all, was a stockade.<sup>92</sup> (image -Library & Archives Canada, C-16826)*



*York Factory National Historic Site (photo – Parks Canada)*

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<sup>92</sup> Michael Payne. *The Most Respectable Place in the Territory*, p. 20

## July 1790 Swan River, Rupert's Land

The HBC had made little progress building forts inland by 1790 when Charles became master of a fort for the first time. The North-West Company, on the other hand, had many small posts along the Saskatchewan River, in Athabasca country, and at the bottom of the Bay. The HBC's business would be better served if the Company's leaders worked inland, the London Committee decided, instead of trying to command from the Bayside forts. To this end, they appointed William Tomison as master of inland posts and made the chief factor at York Factory subordinate to him. Tomison, who had been steward at Severn when Charles was a young apprentice, built two more forts on the Saskatchewan River – South Branch House (near Batoche, Sask.) and Manchester House (near Maidstone, Sask.). Then, he ordered Charles to set up a new post on the Swan River, west of Lake Winnipegosis.

The Swan River meandered through a large flat valley from its source in the Porcupine Hills, gathering water along the way from numerous streams and tributaries, entered Swan Lake and eventually arrived at Lake Winnipegosis by way of the Shoal River. An HBC surveyor noted that the 'river is from 10 to 15 yards wide, easy current, low, grassy, muddy & willowy sides & very little pine except a few ash or poplar. There is also a few Old Oaks... much resembling the low banks of the Saskatchewan. This is the most northern situation that Oak is observed to grow here in this country. They appear to be very old – the greater branches being all dead – some of these trees is about 18 inches diameter at the root.'<sup>93</sup>

Charles began to have misgivings about the assignment soon after they arrived. 'The Canadian Houses are numerous around', he wrote in the post journal, 'and had it not been your honors orders for me to have built a House at the Swan River; I should have chosen a better situation about three days journey farther distant.' He had in mind the Assiniboine River, where it bends southward from its origins in the west. Where he set up camp, there were three Houses of his competitors on one side and another three on the other side. 'Therefore, much cannot be expected,' he warned.

The first traders appeared the next day. Although they were meeting for the first time, Charles and the Cree were likely comfortable with each other. Their men had likely joined the expeditions to the Bay-side forts when Charles was still a boy and they were familiar with HBC trading practices. Charles would have invited them to sit at his fire to smoke several pipes before they began trading negotiations.

The nature of trading at a small outpost was different from the early years when Charles was at forts on the Bay. There were no large flotillas of canoes here; no middlemen bringing hundreds of pelts at one time. Now, a single family or a few men would arrive at any time of the year, offering provisions along with a few furs. The post was an inland depot where the furs were collected and stored until the HBC men took them by canoe to York Factory in time for the annual supply ships.

Charles noted frequently in the post journal that he worked alongside the men. The master of the post was the chief trader, but he also worked with the men to hunt, build canoes, and maintain the buildings. The social structure, which at the Bay-side posts saw officers eating

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<sup>93</sup> HBCA E.3/2076 Peter Fidler journals of exploration and surveys, 10-09-1795

separately from servants, was more egalitarian at the posts where there were so few men living in close quarters.

The river froze over in November and, until it cleared again in April, the men put away the canoes and brought out the snowshoes. By December, Charles was forced to stop trading for furs and use his supplies sparingly to get provisions for the rest of the winter. 'The Canadian Trader having such an advantage over me in trading with Natives by their double proof spiritous Liquors', he wrote, 'oblige me thro' the small quantity of Brandy in my possession to withhold trading till the Spring of the year, otherwise I should be distressed to purchase provisions for my men.'

In May, Charles and most of his men left for York Factory and arrived there a month later 'with all the furs in good condition'. When they returned to Swan River in July, there were twenty-five tents of people well stocked with furs and meat, waiting to trade with them. It was a good start to their second year but by spring he was short of trading supplies because of the limited capacity of the canoes. Samuel Hearne had told the London Committee shortly after establishing Cumberland House that he needed large freighter canoes like the ones the voyageurs used, but they had failed to act. Now, fifteen years later, the HBC men were still hampered by their small canoes, a problem that would persist for a few years to come.

There were other challenges at Swan River House in the following years. Most of the men had signed on with the Company expecting to work at a well-established fort on the Bay and they lacked the skills, and oftentimes the fortitude, to travel inland and survive at a small remote post. In the fall of 1792, for example, provisions at the House were so scarce that Charles asked for volunteers to spend the winter on the plains, where they would be able to survive on bison meat. All but three men refused. The situation became so desperate that a few days later, Charles was 'obliged to serve my men out half an allowance owing to the scarcity of provisions.'<sup>94</sup>

As time went by, Charles taught the men to build canoes and, with each trip to York Fort, they gained paddling and portaging skills. They built a shed for provisions and filled it each fall with ice. They built sleds and acquired dogs to pull them. Eventually, they had horses which they used to retrieve the hunter's kills. They learned to hunt geese, to fish, to make maple sugar and to make pemmican using bison meat and local berries. But the comfortable life they gradually established was about to be disrupted.

In 1793, the North-West Company built upstream from Swan River House near Thunderbird Mountain. Charles responded by setting off with sixteen men to leapfrog ahead of them by establishing Marlborough House at the elbow of the Assiniboine River, a short portage overland from the Swan River. The following year, he built a third post, called Somerset House, on the edge of the open plains near the winter range of the buffalo herds. While Charles was competing with the Montreal traders in the Swan River area, other HBC men were doing the same on the Saskatchewan River and along the Albany River at the bottom of the Bay. All these posts were crudely built, often a collection of buildings but no stockade, because they were to be temporary. When their rivals moved on, they needed to adapt quickly.

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<sup>94</sup> HBCA B.213/a/3, Swan River House Post Journal, Nov. 3, 1792

The HBC changed its policy, allowing men to have local families at the forts, although they could not bring English wives and children to Rupert's Land. The change was purely a business decision, as more and more men were required to work at the inland trading posts and the mixed-ancestry sons of HBC men had the skills the Company needed. They were bilingual; they could paddle and hunt; they knew the land and the water routes.

It's likely that Charles married a Cree woman and started a family while at Swan River. My fifth great-grandmother was, like Charles' mother, never mentioned by name in the post journals. She was likely about ten or so years younger than him, with skill and strength to help them survive. Perhaps they fell in love. We know they had four children because Charles named them in his will – Thomas, Mary, Jane, James. When Charles recalled those years as an old man, he likely envisioned his wife with a sleeping infant in a cradleboard on her back and a toddler holding her hand.

29 Monday Wind N.E. clear fine weather all hands  
Employed as last week Except two Brewing Small  
Beer this Day Messrs Bird Thomas & Isham  
Accompanied by 59 Englishmen in eighteen large  
Canoes arrived with furs from Cumberland and  
Swan River Received a letter from M<sup>r</sup> Tomison  
wherein I find he has stayed at Cumberland  
till the second Trip am sorry to hear the Trade  
at the upper Settlements as faln far short of last  
Year

#### Annual trek to York Factory

I found evidence in the York Factory post journal that three of my ancestors knew each other. On June 29, 1795, James Bird, Thomas Thomas and Charles Isham arrived together in a flotilla of eighteen large canoes. (HBCA B.239/a/97)

## October 1795 Carlton House, Rupert's Land

Charles returned from the annual trek to York Factory in 1795 with a young surveyor assigned to map the area where he had built Swan River, Marlborough, and Somerset Houses. Peter Fidler was from the midlands of England, and in eight years of service had progressed from labourer to post journal writer to surveyor. Fidler had been trained by Philip Turnor, the official surveyor of the HBC, and accompanied him into the far north in 1790-92 to map the area around Lake Athabasca. During this trip, Fidler had tried to establish an HBC presence at Ile-a-la-Crosse, but the Montreal traders drove him out. He wintered with the Chipewyan near Great Slave Lake and later with the Piegan on the western plains, learning the languages of both. For the past two years, he had been at York Fort, creating maps for the London Committee about his travels to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

That fall, Charles found that trade at the posts had declined and the NWC traders were on the move again. Even though winter was imminent, he decided to build a new post at the elbow of the Assiniboine River. He noted in the post journal that there was 'no wood here to build with but small crooked ash – all the Pine being in a swampy situation.'<sup>95</sup> Even so, he decided to stay and sent some men further afield to find wood. Construction began immediately on Carlton House (not to be confused with two others of the same name built that year, one on the Saskatchewan River and another on Southern Indian Lake<sup>96</sup>).

Their nearest neighbour was an NWC post where Peter Grant was master. A well-educated Scot, Grant was ten years younger than Charles and had been invited into the inner circle of the NWC. Although they were competitors, Charles and Grant helped each other that winter. Charles turned to Grant in October when he ran out of provisions: 'I am under the necessity of borrowing a small supply of provisions from the Canadian master here', Charles wrote in the post journal, 'Received from him the flesh of 2 beaver, one side of rib, a brisket & a thigh. This is the first time I was ever necessitated to get any supply from the Canadians – but very frequently have supplied them, when they have been very near starving.'<sup>97</sup> During that winter, he was able to return the favour by supplying Grant with meat when he was 'in great want of provisions'.

Charles had to contend with more unrest among the men that winter. 'Early this morning word came from the hunter's tent to fetch four Red Deer the hunter has killed', he noted one Sunday morning. He told two men to fetch the meat 'but they both peremptory denied...as its being Sunday...it has always been a custom Inland to fetch the meat whenever it was killed...therefore think the above two persons highly deserving your Honors' displeasure, in neglect of their duty.'<sup>98</sup> Charles didn't record any disciplinary action in the journal, but instead suggested to his superiors that they deal with the matter. Perhaps the men used Sunday as an excuse to express their frustration with Charles' leadership or the Spartan life they were leading inland.

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<sup>95</sup> HBCA B.28/a/1 Swan River House post journal, 10/21/1795

<sup>96</sup> HBCA Carlton House (Saskatchewan River), commonly called Fort Carlton, was constructed by James Sandison, assistant to James Bird. The third site near Duck Lake, SK became a national historic site. Carlton House (Man.), also called Three Points, was built by William Linklater on Southern Indian Lake, part of the Churchill River system (about 275 miles north of present-day Thompson).

<sup>97</sup> HBCA B.28/a/1 Swan River House post journal, 10/27/1795

<sup>98</sup> HBCA B.28/a/1 Swan River House post journal 01/10/1796

Throughout the winter of 1796, the men made several trips to Swan River house, which was now used as a depot and staging area for the annual journey to York Fort. On April 1 under sunny skies, Chinook winds began eating the snow as Charles and thirteen men left Carlton with the last of the year's trade in furs. In other years, the spring journey would have taken the dog team and sleds a few days on the snowy land and frozen rivers. This year, however, the thaw had started early, and snow gave way to puddles of water. The main trail was a boggy mess; the animals were distressed. Each footprint, paw print, and hoof print created a muddy hole that filled with brown slurry in seconds. Charles' leggings were wet and caked with mud up to his groin. Curses filled the air. Despair.

Finally, in May three canoes left for the Bay and a fourth, with Peter Fidler headed to his next assignment, went to Cumberland House. Charles didn't make the trip himself that year, but he sent a letter suggesting that he and his men should be deployed elsewhere. The trade had been better than the previous year, he wrote, 'but it was with the greatest difficulty procured' and the men complained about the distance they had to travel over land between the Assiniboine and Swan Rivers. There were 'seven different houses in opposition to me and, considering the small assortment of goods I had and those formidable rivals', <sup>99</sup> the trade next year would be even more difficult, he predicted. Instead, he suggested, the men should be redeployed to the Saskatchewan River forts or to the Athabasca region. 'I am very agreeable to go to any other place I might be appointed to and could render our Honourable Employers much more service than by staying here', Charles concluded.

One year later, Charles was posted to Jack River House, about twenty miles north-east of Lake Winnipeg. The post was one in a chain of depots and resting places between York Fort and Cumberland House and, although he traded furs with local indigenous hunters, the primary function of this post was to support the brigades travelling to the Bay in May and returning inland in August. He remained there for two years until the post was closed and replaced with one in a more suitable location. His next posting would be the most challenging yet.

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<sup>99</sup> HBCA B.28/a/1 Swan River House post journal 05-12-1796





*Charles Isham in the Northwest*

*Charles' early travels took him from the shores of Hudson Bay to the Swan River area, west of Lake Winnipegosis. By 1797, he had been posted to Jack River House (Norway House) and, in subsequent years, he went to Greenwich House (Lac la Biche) and posts on the North Saskatchewan River. (Author tracing of Plate 17, Historical Atlas of Canada, 1993)*

NAME: ISHAM, Charles Thomas (Price) PARISH: York Factory ENTERED SERVICE: 1766

DATES: b.1754  
d. 25 Dec. 1814

| Appointments & Service<br>Outfit Year*:          | Position:   | Post:                             | District:    | HBCA Reference:                       |
|--|---|-----------------------------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>*An Outfit year ran from 1 June to 31 May</i> |   |                                   |              |                                       |
| 1763   | To London on the <i>King George III</i>                                 |                                   |              | A.1/2, fo. 92; A.11/115, fo.74        |
| 1766-73  | Apprentice  | Fort Severn                       |              | A.1/42, fo.172                        |
| 1773-74  | Labourer  | York Factory                      |              | A.11/115, fo. 153; B.49/a/1-2         |
| 1774   | Travelled to Churchill with Graham and Hearne following death of Norton |                                   |              | A.11/115, fo. 172                     |
| 1774   | Selected by Hearne to help build a fort at Basquia (Cumberland House)   |                                   |              | A.11/115, fo. 171                     |
| 1775-1782  | Labourer  | Cumberland House; Hudson House    |              | B.49/a/1-3                            |
| 1788-89  | On furlough   | London                            |              |                                       |
| 1790-97  | Inland trader and supervisor of Canoes                                  | Swan River House                  | Swan River   | B.213/a/1-3                           |
| 1794   | Master  | Marlborough House                 | Swan River   | B.203/a/1                             |
| 1795-97  | Master  | Carlton House (Assiniboine River) | Swan River   | B.213/a/6                             |
| 1797-99  | Master  | Jack River House                  |              | B.154/a/2-3                           |
| 1800-01  | Master  | Greenwich House (Lac la Biche)    | Athabasca    |                                       |
| 1804-05  | Master  | Island House (Paint Creek House)  | Saskatchewan | Journals of Hearne & Taylor<br>p. 173 |
| 1805-06  | Assistant Master  | Cumberland House                  |              | B.239/a/47                            |
| 1806-08  | Trader  | Edmonton House                    |              | B.60/a/6-7                            |
| 1808-09  | On furlough   |                                   |              |                                       |
| 1809-10  | Master  | Cross Lake                        |              | Journals of Hearne & Turnor<br>p. 173 |
| 1810-11  | Inland Trader   |                                   |              | Hearne & Taylor p. 173                |
| 1811-12  | Interpreter   | Red River Colony                  |              | Hearne & Taylor p. 173                |
| 1814   | Returned to London on <i>Prince of Wales</i>                            |                                   |              | C.1/781; Hearne & Taylor p. 173       |
| 25 Dec. 1814                                     | Died  |                                   |              | Hearne & Taylor p. 173                |



*HBC Service Record – Charles Thomas Isham*

*Charles was only twelve when he began his career with the HBC. He served at various inland posts during a period of competition with the NWC. After forty-eight years, he returned to London for the last time and died there at the age of sixty.  
(HBCA Biographical Sheets – Isham, Charles Thomas)*

## September 1800 Greenwich House, Rupert's Land

Charles accepted an assignment in Athabasca country, although many other HBC men refused because of the personal risk posed by the North-West Company. The HBC had sent surveyors into the region ten years earlier, but they had abandoned the outposts within a year because of the violent tactics of the Nor'Westers. Now, the London Committee decided to try again so they sent a contingent from Churchill and another from York Fort to set up provisioning posts for future traders. Peter Fidler, who had mapped the Swan River area the year that Charles built Carlton House, built a post on Lac la Biche and mapped a route from there to Lesser Slave Lake. Charles took over the post, called Greenwich House, after a year in which Fidler was harassed unmercifully.

The North-West Company was well-established in Athabasca country by this time. They had devised a route from Fort Chipewyan to Montreal that consisted of three parts, each covered by different brigades of men. The first moved furs and supplies between Lake Athabasca and the Methye Portage, a twelve-mile overland trail between the Clearwater River and Lac la Loche. The brigades exchanged loads and the crew from the south headed back through Cumberland House to the Grand Portage on Lake Superior. The third brigade completed the journey from there to Montreal. The HBC had the advantage of a shorter route to York Fort, but they hadn't developed an efficient system of outposts to provision their travellers as the NWC had.

Another rival company with its brokers in Montreal entered Athabasca country at the same time as the HBC. It had formed in the aftermath of the American War of Independence (1775-1783), as loyalists moved north into the St. Lawrence Valley, the Niagara peninsula, and areas around Kingston. Dubbed the XY Company because of the markings on their cargo, they built a post near Fort Chipewyan in 1799. The Nor'Westers were outraged. It was during this period of intense rivalry that Charles arrived at Greenwich House to take over from Fidler.

Charles, his wife and four children, now ages three to eight, lived at the post on Lac la Biche for only a year. His experience was like that of Fidler, who had reported that the NWC 'used every mean and roguish method' to force him to leave.<sup>100</sup> They used force to acquire the furs of the Cree and enticed them to trade by increasing the amount of rum available. Charles was no more successful at Greenwich House than Fidler had been, and in 1801, he closed the post and left.

The increased violence between the fur traders in those years forced the British Parliament to confront the issue of law and order. In 1803, they passed the Canada Jurisdiction Act, which made it possible to lay charges against a person in Rupert's Land and have the case judged in Upper or Lower Canada.

Peter Fidler returned to the north in 1802 with seventeen men and built a post less than a mile from the NWC's Fort Chipewyan. Four years later, they abandoned the fort because of incessant intimidation. By 1804, the NWC and XY companies merged; the HBC's share of the trade was only 15% to the NWC's 80%. There were other brief forays into Athabasca country, but the HBC couldn't gain a foothold.

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<sup>100</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Peter Fidler

## May 1805 Paint River House, Rupert's Land

Life on the plains was becoming very dangerous by the time Charles and his family arrived at Paint River House<sup>101</sup>, half-way between Fort Carlton and Edmonton. Incidents such as one at South Branch House in which indigenous warriors destroyed the fort and killed three HBC men, five women and several children, had compelled both companies to increase their defenses and become wary of their clients. The NWC's Fort Vermilion, named after the red clay along the river, was enclosed within the same palisades as the HBC fort. They were positioned on the north side of the river opposite the mouth of the Vermilion River (today about 40 km northwest of Lloydminster), with beaver country to the north and buffalo range to the south. This strategic location on a high plateau meant that lookouts could spot anyone in the distance approaching the forts.

The trading alliances among the tribes that had endured for decades were unravelling as the fur traders moved inland. In the previous decade, both the HBC and NWC had built forts as far west as present-day Edmonton and Rocky Mountain House. The Cree and Assiniboine were no longer middlemen, trading goods for furs with other tribes, because now their historic trading partners could deal directly with the two companies. The Blackfoot acquired more guns in this way and became a formidable military force. They got horses from their allies, the Gros Ventre, who in turn got them from the Arapaho-Cheyenne south of the American border. The Gros Ventre held a long-standing grudge against the Cree who had withheld guns during their tenure as middlemen. Now, they were just as likely to take revenge by killing an HBC or NWC trader as a Cree or Assiniboine man. The Cree adapted to their new circumstances by pushing onto the plains and becoming buffalo hunters. As the herds became smaller because of the voracious American market for buffalo robes, they needed to go further south into Blackfoot territory to hunt. Skirmishes were inevitable.

I can see Charles on a quiet day at the fort. He's fifty and there is a touch of gray in his beard. He has been with the HBC for thirty-eight years since he began as an apprentice at a fort on the Bay. Paint River House is alive with sound – birds nesting in the trees along the riverbank, men scuffling across the courtyard to the horse sheds, children squealing as they play. The air is warmer here than at his last post in Athabasca country and spring has come earlier. He should be content, but he must be vigilant, wary of his competitors living so near and suspicious of his clients who are primed for war.

After one year at Paint River House, Charles moved to Cumberland House as assistant to the new master who had never worked inland. It was now a bustling supply depot at the crossroads of canoe routes from the south going to York Fort, Athabasca country, and the Saskatchewan River. His stay was brief, however, and the following year James Bird posted Charles to Edmonton House. Perhaps Charles lacked the ambition and confidence of a leader like Bird, who at thirty-two was master at Edmonton House and in charge of all posts in the Saskatchewan River district from Cumberland House to the Rocky Mountains. Maybe Charles pulled back from the demands of being master at a fort or, as one historian suggested, his mixed ethnicity limited his rise in the ranks. More likely, Bird decided where to deploy a man

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<sup>101</sup> Ted Binnema and Gerhard Ens (ed.), *Edmonton House Journals, Correspondence & Reports 1806-1821*. (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 2012) In the Edmonton House journals, James Bird called the fort Paint Creek House as well as Paint River House.

with Charles' skills and experience – master at a challenging fort one year; coaching a new head man at a large supply depot the next; and trading in the hinterland beyond Edmonton House the following. Throughout these years, Bird always called Charles 'Mr. Isham' in the post journal, a title reserved for officers that also indicated the respect he commanded as an English gentleman.

## July 1806 Edmonton House, Rupert's Land

Charles may have been with James Bird's group, which was returning to Edmonton House after visiting forts on the Saskatchewan River, when word came of a 'fatal quarrel' between the Blackfoot and Cree.<sup>102</sup> The long-standing trade alliance ended, Bird reported in his journal, when 28 Blackfoot and three Cree men were killed in a skirmish. The Cree, Bird said, were 'flying in all quarters to conceal themselves in the woods' and the Blackfoot were threatening vengeance upon them and their allies. Charles and his family were at greater risk than most in Bird's entourage because they were Cree.

A few days later as Bird's canoes continued on their way to Edmonton House, they caught up with a French canoe that had left Cumberland House just before them. The men were 'still pale with fear' having that day been pursued by three or four hundred Blackfoot on horseback and on foot. One of their men had been killed. Later that evening, Bird's group anchored in the middle of the river on a sandbank. Every man was armed, and guards were posted to keep watch all night.

When Charles and James Bird arrived at Edmonton House, there was news of more bloodshed. Four tents of Cree people with no knowledge of recent events had been attacked by two or three hundred Blackfoot warriors. Two men escaped but 25 'men, women & children were either butchered or taken slaves'.<sup>103</sup>

Edmonton House was built at the bottom of a deep, broad valley beside the Saskatchewan River. People arriving by horseback on the plains above could be surprised when the vast flat prairie suddenly opened onto a precipitous ravine leading down to the valley floor. The vegetation changed from grassy stubble and knots of Aspen trees to dense willow and spruce forest. Animals used the valley as a corridor to travel from the mountains far to the west so that sometimes there were reports of black bears and cougars. Edmonton House was beside the NWC's Fort Augustus in an area now called Rosedale Flats, about where the power station sits today.<sup>104</sup> It was like a small town with people of all ages living within its walls. Charles, for one, had four children ages four to fourteen. Bird had six boys by his first wife, Mary, and a newborn daughter by his second wife, Elizabeth. In all, there were more women and children at the fort than HBC employees. The future workforce of the HBC was being reared here by its own servants.

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<sup>102</sup> Binnema & Ens, *Edmonton House Journals*, 85

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87

<sup>104</sup> This was the second location of Fort Edmonton.

The years of tension and violence between 1806 and 1850 were labelled 'The Horse Wars' by some historians<sup>105</sup>. The Blackfoot and their allies, the Gros Ventres, Sarcee, Peigan and Blood Indians, who were now enemies of the Cree and Assiniboine, controlled the sources of new horses. The Cree lost horses each winter because they released them to fend for themselves, whereas the Blackfoot had learned over several decades to feed them and shelter them from the elements. With each spring, a new round of horse thefts was reported in the fort journals, not only taken from the Cree's rivals but also from the NWC and HBC forts.

Although Edmonton House was positioned between two warring tribes, the Cree on the north and the Blackfoot on the south, it was never attacked. 1806-07 was a difficult year, however, because no one came to trade and there was no meat or pemmican coming in. The people in the fort lived mostly on fish caught at lakes about 60 km away. Charles made several trips out to meet Cree trappers in their winter hunting grounds, collecting their furs because they refused to come to the fort.

The native-born population had begun to increase outside of the fur trade posts as well as within. 'Freemen', as Bird called them in the post journals, had worked for one of the companies but chose to stay in the Northwest when their contracts expired. They did not establish settlements but were nomadic hunters, tolerated by the Indigenous people because of kinship ties to local tribes. A small group of these independent traders from Lower Canada (Quebec) arrived in the area about this time. Among them were four men – Lagimodière, Bellegarde, Paquin<sup>106</sup>, and Chalifou – who had been in the Pembina area (south of Winnipeg) where they had families with Cree women. James Bird at Edmonton House was happy to trade for their high-quality furs because the Cree were no longer bringing in enough. Lagimodière had recently abandoned his Cree family and married a French-Canadian woman, Marie-Anne Gaboury, who insisted on accompanying her husband out west. She would become known as the first white woman in the Northwest, as well as the grandmother of Louis Riel.

The Lagimodière group remained near Edmonton House for a few years and were deeply affected by the trouble between the Cree and Blackfoot. It wasn't unusual for a group of warriors to take revenge at their first opportunity, not necessarily on the perpetrators of an offence, such as horse stealing. That's likely what happened on the day that a band of Sarcee found the campsite where the men had left their families while they were hunting and trading. There were 151 people killed that day, including the wives and children of Paquin and Chalifoux<sup>107</sup>. Lagimodière had a separate encounter because his wife and two small children were not in the camp. Marie-Anne recalled years later in stories she told her children that the Sarcee came upon her and the children in a single tent. They surrounded it and settled down to wait for her

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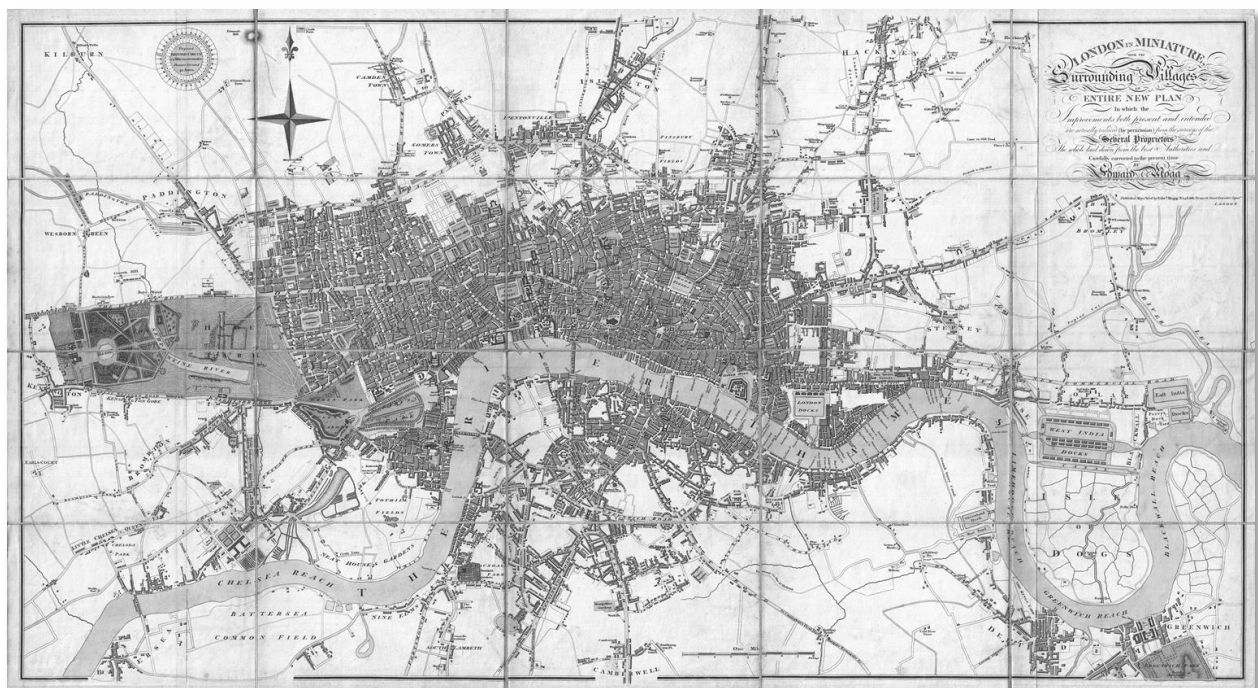
<sup>105</sup> Milloy, *The Plains Cree*, 67

<sup>106</sup> Joseph Paquin, who was in the Lagimodière party, is my fourth great-grandfather. He was descended from Nicolas Paquin, a carpenter who arrived in New France from Normandy in 1672. The contract Joseph Paquin signed with the other free traders shows that his home parish was Ste Genevieve de Berthier (northeast of present-day Montreal) along the St. Lawrence River. This was not his first trip to Rupert's Land, however, because he had a son with his Cree wife, Margaret, in 1800. The boy, also named Joseph, would be an old man when the Paquin family clashed with Louis Riel in 1870.

<sup>107</sup> George Dugast, *The First Canadian Woman in the Northwest* (Winnipeg: The Manitoba Free Press Company, 1902) Marie Anne Gaboury told this story to her children. She reported the incident happened in 1809. Maggie Siggins reported the number killed in her book, *Marie-Anne: The Extraordinary Life of Louis Riel's Grandmother* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2008).

husband to return. When he arrived, he convinced the warriors to let the family camp elsewhere near a grove of trees so his wife could rest. They kept going, however, travelling all night and several more days. When they arrived at Edmonton House, Marie-Ann recalled that she could see the Sarcee in hot pursuit. My fourth great-grandfather, Joseph Paquin, and the other freemen who had lost their families were already at the fort.

The last time Charles was mentioned in relation to Edmonton House was in August 1808 when he was going to York Factory and Bird was returning inland. Charles was on his way to England for the first time in twenty years.



London 1806

*Britain held its first census in 1801. There were 1,096,784 people in the greater London area, an increase of almost 350,000 since James Isham died in 1761. There was more migration from within the country to London but also from the numerous colonies. Also, there had been a marked decline in infant mortality because of better hygiene and child rearing practices. (map: The Strangers Guide to London and Westminster 1806, Edward Mogg)*

## November 1808 London, England

Charles must have noticed great changes in London since his previous visit. The normally crowded docks on the Thames near London Bridge had been relieved of ships conducting international trade when three enclosed docks were built by private companies. Each dock was lined with warehouses ready to receive tea, spices, silk, mahogany, cocoa, ivory and other exotic imports from the Caribbean, India and China. The furs from Rupert's Land were but a drop in this sea of trade from the vast British Empire.

The British Navy had recently proved that it was the most powerful in the region at the Battle of Trafalgar when twenty-two of Napoleon's ships were destroyed, but none of the British. The war raged on, however, and the HBC continued to suffer from the trade embargo preventing furs being sold to Europe. The Company directors had even considered withdrawing from the fur trade altogether as their shares decreased in value and their warehouses filled with furs that had no market.

Charles lived in White Grove Street for only a few months before the annual ship to York Fort left in the summer of 1809. During that time, he likely visited his cousins, whom he had lived with as a boy. His uncle Thomas had died years earlier.<sup>108</sup> While in London, he made a will that entrusted the HBC to pay an annual sum to each of his children from an annuity created from his life savings of £1800. He made no allowance for his Cree wife in the will, suggesting that she may have died before his trip.

The most interesting thing about Charles Isham is that he was comfortable in two very different worlds – the rugged frontier life of HBC forts; and the crowded urban existence of London. He could adapt, simply by changing his clothes and assuming his other persona. Moccasins and moose meat; leather boots and beef. Subsistence and plenty. I doubt that he preferred one lifestyle over the other. Both would have been appealing. Comfortable. Intriguing.

The ethnic label, 'half-breed' cannot be used to describe Charles because it did not appear in HBC and government documents until years later. If anything, he was a 'double-breed'. He was not half-British and half-Cree, accepted in neither world, but both British and Cree, fluent and competent in both worlds. It may never have occurred to him to question his identity, to ponder the existential question, "Who am I?"

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<sup>108</sup> The date of his death is unknown but in 1808 he would have been about 94.



## September 1812 Red River Colony, Assiniboia

Charles returned to North America from his furlough in London just as the HBC's prospects were about to improve. A rich Scottish nobleman had begun buying shares in the Company to gain a seat on the London Committee, so he could establish a colony in HBC territory. Thomas Douglas, the Earl of Selkirk, had already done so in Prince Edward Island and Upper Canada and his latest scheme would resettle poor Scottish crofters onto farmland in the Northwest. The men of the Committee were skeptical of his proposal at first. The charter that had given the Company a trade monopoly also anticipated the need for colonies, but until now permanent settlements had been unnecessary, even counterproductive. A colony made good business sense, Lord Selkirk reasoned, because it could supply local provisions to the HBC and save the cost and effort of bringing foodstuffs from Britain. The Company was also finding it difficult to recruit employees during wartime and a colony with a significant local population could fill that need. The HBC granted him 116,000 square miles at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers in what is now southern Manitoba and parts of North Dakota. Selkirk's vision would change the course of Charles' career as well as the lives of everyone living in the area.

The Red River flowed lazily in a shallow valley created by retreating glaciers at the end of the last Ice Age. It started as a trickle from Lake Traverse (on the border between present-day Minnesota and North Dakota) but 800 km downstream where it was joined by the smaller Assiniboine River from the west, it was mature, wide, and muddy. On a summer day, the River was benign and nurturing; in winter, it was quiet, frozen and covered with snow. In the spring, however, it was destructive and sometimes lethal. Every year, when the ice broke and moved en masse, the riverbank was scoured clean of the saplings and grasses of the previous year. Some years, perhaps once or twice in a century, the river flooded and spilled onto the surrounding plains. A person couldn't be complacent with a river like the Red. You needed to be prepared for Spring.

The location of the proposed settlement was historically significant for several groups. The 'Forks', as locals called the place where the Assiniboine flowed into the Red River, had been a gathering place for indigenous people for as long as anyone could remember. The Red River valley provided a natural transportation corridor from as far south as present-day St. Paul, Minnesota, to Lake Winnipeg. Likewise, people could follow the Assiniboine River from the west to the Forks to attend summer powwows and trading fairs. The traders from Montreal had also frequented the area since the earliest days of La Vérendrye, and the NWC had used it in recent years as a rendezvous point for the company's traders. The NWC's Fort Gibraltar was built there in 1809. The HBC hadn't yet built a fort but there was a storage depot for brigades passing through.

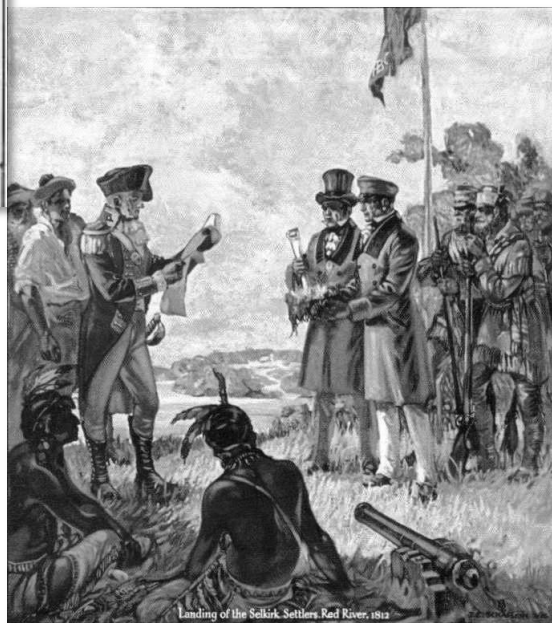
### Selkirk's Assiniboia

The HBC granted Lord Selkirk 116,000 square miles in what is now southern Manitoba and parts of North Dakota. He called it Assiniboia. (map: Manitoba Historical Society)



### Macdonell reads Selkirk Patent

A picture showing Macdonell reading Selkirk's patent for Assiniboia was created for the HBC's 1924 calendar. It depicts the governor, a couple of NWC men, a few workmen, some free traders, and Peguis' warriors. Missing is the interpreter, Charles Isham. (image: HBC Heritage Collection, [hbc.heritage.ca](http://hbc.heritage.ca))



Recently, two other groups had settled along the Red River in the area that would soon be called Assiniboia. A band of Saulteaux, originally from Sault Ste Marie, had a summer village at Netley Creek, about where the River joined Lake Winnipeg. The band moved south to the Pembina River each winter where there was easy access to bison herds. Their chief, Peguis, was short, strong and twenty years younger than Charles. He spoke in clear, deep tones with the pacing and strength of an orator. His nose had been deeply scarred in a battle a few years earlier, but the disfigurement did not detract from his power. The second group of newcomers had arrived just months before the first Selkirk settlers. Some of the freemen who had been in the Edmonton area when Charles was posted there had heard news of the proposed colony and were already building homes on the eastern banks of the River in anticipation of the new community.

Charles was the interpreter for the colony's first governor, Miles Macdonell, Macdonell was a Scot who had served in the British Army and had been farming in Upper Canada but hoped to find another military position. He had no experience in the Northwest. The two arrived with a few men sent out in advance of the Scottish settlers to build houses for them. The work crew had arrived at Churchill the previous year too late to travel to the site of the new colony, however, and arrived only weeks before the first settlers. On September 4, 1812, Macdonell hosted an official ceremony attended by those already living there – men of the two fur trade companies, the Saulteaux tribe, and the freemen – and announced Selkirk's claim to Assiniboia. Charles is never mentioned in historical accounts of this pivotal event, but he would have been there, right beside Macdonell interpreting his message into Cree, Saulteaux, and French.

Had the NWC men known what to expect, they may have crafted a suitable response. A witty rebuttal to a preposterous claim. Perhaps, a threat of future conflict.

Had Peguis understood what was really intended, a settlement that would limit access to an area his tribe frequented, he may have delivered a lengthy speech with a convincing argument that would have changed Macdonell's plans. Or, an appeal to the Crown to respect their indigenous rights.

But, no one said anything that day. And, later as Macdonell poured shots of rum for invited guests in his tent, he was confident that he would not be opposed.

Indeed, the NWC did not appear to react immediately to the threat of a colony at the crossroads of the supply route between Montreal and the Northwest. In fact, in the first months, their men helped the settlers to survive. But, unknown to Macdonell, they had sent word to Fort William for guidance on how to proceed and were awaiting instructions from the NWC partners.

Selkirk had anticipated resistance from local tribes and collaborated with governor Macdonell to have a trader from York Fort bring trading goods to make it appear that they were simply building another HBC post. "When it can no longer be concealed that the establishment is to be permanent," Selkirk wrote to Macdonell, "if the jealousy of the Indians appears to be roused, the purpose of purchasing the land must be brought forward." You shouldn't pay for the land all at once, he said, because annual payments to the families would maintain a permanent hold over their peaceable behavior.<sup>109</sup> A few years later when Selkirk visited the colony, he negotiated a treaty with five local native leaders. By that time, there was no turning back. The British colonists were there to stay.

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<sup>109</sup> Donna G. Sutherland, *Peguis: A Noble Friend* (St. Andrews: Chief Peguis Heritage Park Inc., 2003), 38

In October the first group of settlers arrived from York Fort, having completed the 728-mile journey by canoe and on foot in fifty-five days. Entire families of Campbell's, McLean's, McGilvera's, and others from the Isle of Mull off the northwest coast of Scotland had no place to live because there had been no time to build houses for everyone. The governor's immediate concern was how to feed 120 men, women and children during the winter. He decided to follow the example of Peguis' band and move everyone south to Pembina where they would have easy access to bison on the plains. Charles stayed at Red River, in charge of the labourers who would continue construction throughout the winter. His four children, now ranging in age from ten to twenty, stayed with him.

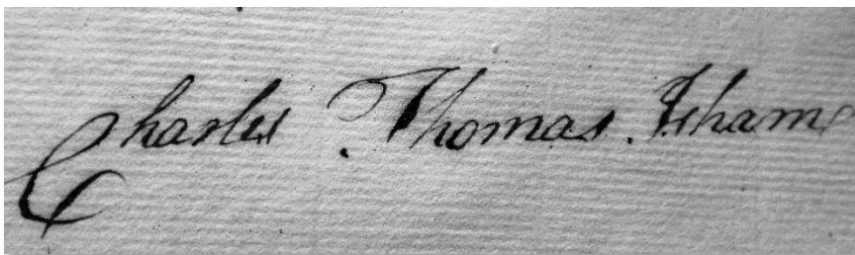
Charles likely had no idea that the modest plans of Lord Selkirk would be the nucleus of a settlement that would sprawl along the banks of both rivers in the decades to come. Had he thought about the growth of London since he was a boy going to school, he may have been able to imagine a city of 650,000 people two hundred years into the future. The buildings that he helped build that year established the first group of colonists. Sixty years later, the fledgling Red River Settlement would be called 'Winnipeg'.

## December 1814 London, England

After a year as interpreter to the governor of the new colony, Charles returned to England. The reason for his trip is unknown but it's unlikely that he intended to retire there because he had four children in North America. Perhaps at age sixty he needed medical attention; within months of his arrival, he died. I imagine a light dusting of snow settling on the cobblestones, chimney stacks, and church spires of London that morning. It was Christmas Day, 1814.

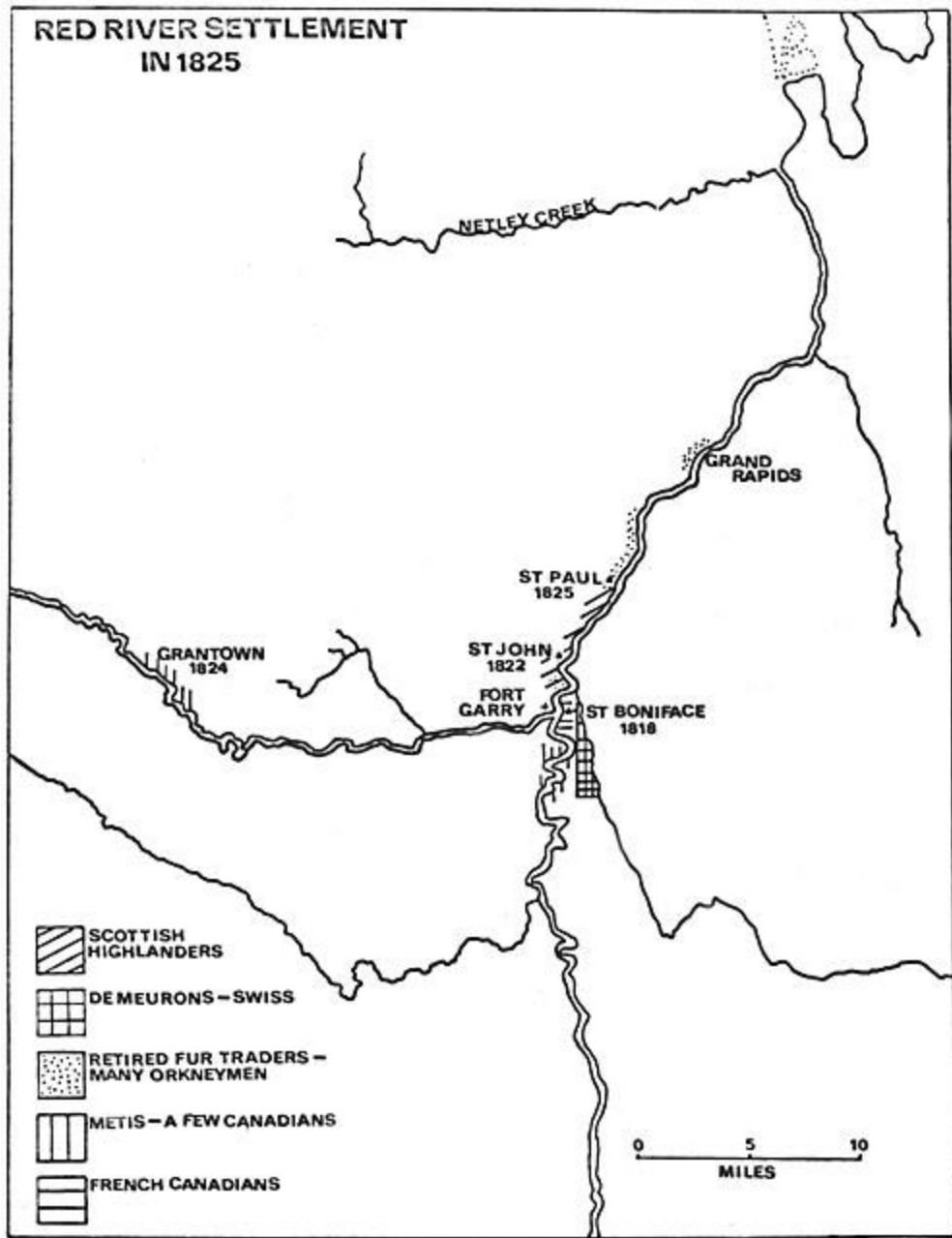
Charles was likely buried in an Anglican church in a neighbourhood like Holborn or Bloomsbury, a place with a long connection to the Isham family. His will was proved in court and when the HBC ships left the following spring, word of his death was dispatched to his heirs.

I am comforted to think that Charles did not die alone. He had family on both sides of the north Atlantic and strong personal connections to both England and Rupert's Land. Perhaps his cousins visited his grave a few times before they too died. More likely, it was a silent memorial, undisturbed until decades later the headstone was removed and propped against the back fence to make room for more souls. But he is not forgotten. In Canada, eight generations later, I think of him.



*Signature of Charles  
Thomas Isham*

## Chapter Three: Jane Isham Heywood Mowat (1796-1848)



*Red River Settlement 1825 (map – Red River Ancestry)*

## June 1815 Jack River House, Rupert's Land

Olber's Comet was visible in the northern hemisphere for several weeks and, coming as it did so soon after the Great Comet of 1811, was seen by some as a portent of troubled times to come.

Jane's life was settled after years of travelling among the northern posts with her parents and siblings. She was born in the Swan River area but had lived in places like Fort Edmonton, Cumberland House, Paint River House, and the new Red River colony. Before her father left for London, he had ensured that her two brothers, Thomas and James, had contracts with the HBC for fishing and hunting and she and her sister, Mary, were married to suitable HBC men. Jane's husband was Joseph Heywood, a tall young man from Bolsover in the midlands of England, described as 'a steady man and a good hand [with] Indians'<sup>110</sup>. Heywood began as a laborer but was posted to Jack River House once he learned how to handle the transport boats. Jane was nineteen and expecting their second child.

Jack River House, the depot on the York Factory canoe route where Jane's family had lived almost two decades earlier, had changed little. There were five dwellings now and two store houses alongside a trading room. The twenty-six families were barely able to live on local resources – the spring and fall goose hunt, summer fishery, and meat brought in year-round by hunters. They had planted an acre of potatoes but otherwise needed to forage for greens and berries.<sup>111</sup>

On the annual supply ship that year, word came that Jane's father, Charles Isham, had died in London the previous Christmas. He left a small annuity for each child, which was deposited into the HBC accounts so that the siblings could purchase things at the company's stores.

Living at this tiny strategic post, Jane and her family were privy to the latest news and gossip from across Rupert's Land because all the canoe brigades passed through, whether they were bound for York Factory, Edmonton House, or the Red River Settlement. There were complaints about the escalating violence from the NWC at the inland posts. Some called it 'war'. Miles Macdonell, the governor of the colony, passed through the previous summer on his way to York Factory to greet a new group of settlers. Macdonell had been at Red River the year her father was interpreter and the first two groups of colonists arrived. The third group stopped briefly to rest at Jack River House a few weeks later, exhausted after being quarantined for the winter at Churchill with ship's fever (typhus).

There were almost two hundred 'Selkirk Settlers' in the Red River Settlement that year, but it was also growing with people from within Rupert's Land. Two hundred French-speaking traders who had decided to stay in the Northwest with their native families rather than returning to Montreal, had built houses there in recent years. No one would arrive from the more settled areas of North America for another fifty years, however, because travel from the east was too arduous.

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<sup>110</sup> HBCA Biographical Sheets - HEYWOOD, JOSEPH

<sup>111</sup> Raymond M. Beaumont, 'Norway House: A Brief History – From its beginnings to Treaty Adhesions in 1908. (Frontier School Division No.48, 1993)

Perhaps it was evening when Jane heard that sixty people had set up camp a mile or so south of the HBC post. Trouble had been building at the Red River settlement for months. The colonists were discouraged by the lack of supplies and the intense effort required to establish new farms. Governor Macdonell was worried that there wouldn't be enough food for the winter and decided that most of the pemmican must remain in the colony. The NWC relied on pemmican for their voyageurs, so they were angered by the so called 'Pemmican Proclamation'. By June 1815, they had convinced most of the settlers to leave for the east where they promised farms were available and life was 'civilized'. At the same time, they arrested Macdonell and took him along with 133 colonists to Lower Canada. Sixty people remained in the colony until local men aligned with the NWC threatened to kill them and set their farms on fire. They fled north to Jack River House.

Coincidentally, Thomas Thomas<sup>112</sup>, the new governor of the Northern Department, had moved to Jack River House with his family for the winter. He was approaching retirement after several years as master of Severn House and four years at Fort Albany as superintendent of the Southern Department. Thomas convinced Colin Robertson to lead the settlers back to the Red River. Robertson had arrived recently from Montreal where he had recruited experienced voyageurs and some Iroquois men to join the HBC's Athabasca campaign. His entourage continued without him and he went south with some of the refugees from the colony. They seized the NWC's fort at the Forks and began rebuilding Fort Douglas, which had been destroyed as the colonists fled.

Jane likely became friends with Thomas' wife, Sarah, and their eldest daughter, Frances, who was about Jane's age. Sarah had five girls and a boy and was expecting another baby. They had things in common and the community was so small that it's safe to say that they knew each other well.

That September another group of settlers, newly arrived from Britain by way of York Factory, stopped at Jack River House for a day or so of rest before continuing to the Red River. Most were from rural areas of Scotland, but three were from London. George Adams, his brother and sister-in-law, would become members of Jane's family years later when he married her daughter, Ann. The passenger log lists them alongside Bannerman, McKay, Matherson, Polson and other families that included weavers, tailors, shoemakers, labourers and a saddler.<sup>113</sup> For good measure, Selkirk had sent Robert Semple on the same ship to take over as governor of the colony in case something happened to Miles Macdonell. This was Lord Selkirk's last attempt at resettling crofters from Scotland and his most successful. This group would stay in the Red River Settlement for years to come unlike those who had just left for Canada with the NWC escort.

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<sup>112</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Thomas Thomas. My five-times-great grandfather, Thomas Thomas, was born in Carmarthen, Wales, in 1766. He joined the HBC in 1789 as surgeon at York Factory. He became master at Severn House in 1796, following a furlough in England and rose in the ranks to become Superintendent of the Southern Department. He and his Cree wife, Sarah, had two sons and six daughters.

<sup>113</sup> Dr. George Bryce, *The Romantic Settlement of Lord Selkirk's Colonists*, Appendix E



## June 1816 Jack River House, Rupert's Land

The colonists fled north for a second time, away from the Red River Settlement and took refuge at Jack River House. The NWC men and their allies in the colony had continued to harass and threaten the settlers until one day things went too far. No one knows who fired the first shot, but at the end of the day the Governor and several men were dead. The Battle of Seven Oaks, as it would be called, would spawn stories and songs for years.

There are many versions of how the battle started. Nor'Wester Cuthbert Grant<sup>114</sup> and about fifty men disguised as Cree warriors came from the west on the Assiniboine River, heading for a rendezvous spot about fifteen miles north of Fort Garry on the Red River. Their plan was to skirt around the colony, out of sight of any farmers, HBC men and the governor, and to join forces with another group before attacking the fort. That was the plan.

Late in the afternoon, they hid their canoes and transferred their supplies to two carts. One group passed the fort unseen. The second group was spotted so Governor Semple and twenty-eight men intercepted them. As Semple's volunteers closed in, they realized too late they were outnumbered. The two groups faced each other. One man rode out, 'waving his hand and calling out in a most insolent manner', an observer wrote later.<sup>115</sup> Semple grabbed the bridle of the man's horse and suddenly the shooting started. It was all over within fifteen minutes. Some accounts say that the villains disemboweled the men as they lay dying. Semple, wounded and begging for mercy, was shot and killed. By the time the sun set, twenty-one men were dead.

The Saulteaux chief, Peguis, and his people were just miles away at their summer home on Netley Creek that June. Governor Semple had told them 'not to interfere' when they reported that the Nor'Westers planned to destroy the fort. Days later when Semple was killed at Seven Oaks, 'the old Chief carried him home to the fort', a survivor recalled, 'washed his body and wept for him'.<sup>116</sup> Peguis and his band had helped the settlers since they first arrived, so when they fled the colony days later, the Saulteaux were distressed and openly shed tears.<sup>117</sup>

Some say the Battle of Seven Oaks was the climax of the rivalry between the HBC and NWC; that it was the last violent act before the two companies merged and hostilities ceased. Others say it was a moment of awareness, the spark that ignited the identity of the Métis Nation. It was about this time that the term 'half-breed' began to appear in HBC journals, as well as 'half Indians' and 'Métis'.<sup>118</sup>

I can imagine the impact of 150 men, women and children with no supplies and no means of survival arriving at the small community of Jack River House. There were people camped everywhere, from the waterline of the river up the rocky hill to the trees. The locals could be seen digging latrines, building wooden tents, and preparing fire pits. They shared blankets, flour, and space until they had nothing more to give. Perhaps it appeared that the colonists would be

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<sup>114</sup> George Woodcock, "GRANT, CUTHBERT (d. 1854)," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 8, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003

<sup>115</sup> Joseph E. Martin, "The 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Seven Oaks", MHS Transactions, Series 3, Number 22, 1965-66

<sup>116</sup> Diary of Reverend William Cockran (1831)

<sup>117</sup> Donna G. Sutherland, 'Peguis: A Noble Friend', p.57

<sup>118</sup> Jennifer S.H. Brown, *An Ethnohistorian in Rupert's Land.*, p. 50-51

there for months, possibly until ships arrived at York Fort to take them back to Britain. The talk in the camp was likely that the grand experiment was over, and everyone wanted to go home.

The settlers didn't know that, even as they fled, Lord Selkirk was on his way west, bringing ninety trained soldiers to defend the settlement. The de Meurons were Swiss mercenaries fresh from the War of 1812 and they had already helped Selkirk to take the NWC's Fort William without a shot. The mere sight of a well-ordered, armed group of soldiers in matching uniforms was enough to make a ragtag group of fur traders surrender. Selkirk sent Miles Macdonell and half of the de Meurons to Red River while he remained at Fort William a little longer. They arrived at the colony in early January 1817 and took control.

The next month a small group of colonists left Jack River House to re-establish Red River, among them George Adams, Jane's future son-in-law. They expected to see a landscape devastated by fire, their crops trampled by Métis horses. But to everyone's surprise, the grain had matured and there was a bumper crop that year. Most buildings had to be repaired, stock rounded up, and canoes replaced but the few colonists who had remained had repaired Fort Douglas. Small groups of soldiers marching in unison patrolled the dirt track along the river that cut through the farms. There was calm and order.

Lord Selkirk and the other de Meurons arrived in June, just as the rest of the colonists returned from Jack River House where they had spent the winter. Selkirk didn't plan to stay long but he was determined to leave the colony positioned to survive. He negotiated a treaty with local indigenous people that would allow the settlers to farm along the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, settling once and for all the NWC claim that they didn't belong there.<sup>119</sup> After the treaty was signed, Selkirk had the settlement surveyed into river lots and assigned to each settler family. Before he left in September, Selkirk bestowed a medal on the Saulteaux chief and created an honour roll with the names of forty-five settlers who had helped to re-establish the settlement, including George Adams.<sup>120</sup>

Lord Selkirk died in 1820, leaving his adult children with responsibility for Assiniboia. The following year, they sent a group of Swiss families to the Red River, but otherwise managed the colony from afar. Among the Swiss immigrants was Peter Rindisbacher, a young artist who painted scenes that continue to this day to contribute to our understanding of the early nineteenth century in the Northwest. The Swiss group was the last that arrived as part of Selkirk's scheme.

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<sup>119</sup> Saulteaux leaders who signed the Selkirk Treaty -Mache Wkenesb (Le Sonnant), Mechkadewikonaie (Le Robe Noir), Kagiwoksboia (L'homme Noir), Peguis, and Ouckidoat (Premier). It was witnessed by Thomas Thomas, James Bird, F. Matthey Capt., P. d'Orsonnens Capt., Miles Macdonell, and J. DeLorimier.

<sup>120</sup> Dr. George Bryce, *The Romantic Settlement of Lord Selkirk's Colonists*, Appendix F

## August 1820 Norway House, Rupert's Land

Months before the annual ships arrived that year, Jane must have known that her husband's contract would end, and he would return to England. It was not unusual for an HBC man with a Rupert's Land family to leave them behind. Sometimes men left because they retired, and the only option was to return to Britain; only recently had it become possible to move to the Red River Settlement. In Joseph Heywood's case, he was still a young man who needed a job. Perhaps he tried to remain by getting another HBC contract<sup>121</sup>, or maybe he always intended to settle down in his home village of Bolsover. Whatever his options or hopes, Heywood left on the ship from York Factory in 1820. Jane and the three children, Charles, Ann and Elizabeth, never saw him again.<sup>122</sup>

Jane's story was so common that social norms for leaving an indigenous wife and family when a man returned to Britain had developed over the years. The gentlemanly thing to do was to arrange for another HBC servant to take over the family. A few men took their families to Britain, if the Company would let them on the ships, but that was unusual and rarely successful. (Nowadays, descendants of such families in the Orkney Islands proudly acknowledge their Cree heritage.) Most men simply abandoned their North American families.

If Heywood thought of his small family in Rupert's Land, it was likely with satisfaction that he had done the right thing. He had arranged for Adam Mowat from Orkney to take on his family<sup>123</sup>. Mowat was a laborer and middleman in the canoes (middle position), illiterate, and, at forty-three, nearing retirement. Mowat would prove to be dependable, sober, and diligent; and willing to work for low wages. He was a loyal husband and stepfather and would stay in North America for the rest of his life.

By June 1821, spring had come to Norway House and the first canoe brigades were passing through on rivers now clear of ice. I imagine Jane in her log house, sweeping the dirt floors of winter debris. Hanging on the walls are Mowat's hunting gun, an unused cradleboard, and her snowshoes. The children, now seven, six and four, are playing outside in the shrubs along the edge of the village or along the ridge near the river. The latest group of travelers pull their canoes onto shore.

George Simpson, who was to be governor-in-chief should the NWC arrest the current governor, had just returned from a year in Athabasca country. He had taken charge, instilling discipline and order into the men of the HBC posts, and fear into their rivals. He was an

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<sup>121</sup> Heywood returned to the Bay the following year accompanying some new recruits but left again on the return ship. HBCA Biographical Sheets – Heywood, Joseph

<sup>122</sup> Joseph Heywood and Jane Isham had three children – Charles (born 1814), Ann (born 1815), and Elizabeth (born 1818). They were all born at Jack River House (later Norway House). The children were baptized later when Ann was ten years old. Their parents are recorded on St. John's Anglican Church baptismal records #528, #532 and #533.

<sup>123</sup> Adam Mowat was likely born in 1777 and not 1767 as stated in Sprague & Fry (Table 1. #3227). This is confirmed in the census records of the Red River colony for 1827, 1831, 1832, 1833. (Although his age varies erratically in the other census years, nothing suggests that he was born in 1767.)

impressive sight – tall with flaming red hair, and well-dressed - with the confidence and command of someone who would make his mark in the Northwest.<sup>124</sup> While he was in Athabasca territory, the HBC had negotiated a merger with the NWC. He was to be governor of the Northern Department, which meant that he was now responsible for the land west of Hudson's Bay as far as the Pacific Ocean, including the new settlement of Red River. It would be challenging because the men of the two companies didn't trust each other after two decades of aggressive competition.

On August 11, 1821, the men who would become the new HBC's chief factors and traders met at Norway House. Jane would never again see so many powerful men all at one time and in one place. By the time the meeting was over, the Company had decided to abandon the NWC's traditional route to Montreal and to send all furs to Britain through York Factory. A few days later, Simpson hosted a banquet at York Factory to begin building rapport between men who had been bitter competitors just days earlier. Although the party began awkwardly, as the former NWC men suspected they would be at a disadvantage with Simpson as leader, he was charming and diplomatic. At night's end, he had assuaged their fears and gained them as allies and obedient employees. In the weeks that followed, he ruthlessly downsized the new Company reducing by half the number of men and forts.

Jane may have seen Simpson a few months later when he passed through Norway House on his first grand tour of the forts along the Saskatchewan and Assiniboine Rivers. She would see him again many times, and he would shape the circumstances of her life for years to come.

## August 1825 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

Jane's family left Norway House in 1825 and moved to the Red River Settlement, attracted no doubt by the promise of a better life but also pushed out as part of George Simpson's downsizing campaign. Her husband, Adam Mowat, was among the hundreds of men who had lost their jobs following the merger of the NWC and HBC. Jane's brothers, Thomas and James Isham, left with them because they no longer had contracts to supply Jack River House with provisions.<sup>125</sup> They filled the canoes with possessions, food and children; Jane's three were eight to eleven years old and her brother, Thomas, had an infant.

The canoes travelled down the east side of Lake Winnipeg to the mouth of the Red River, following the same route that Selkirk's settlers had taken. The river spilled into the lake, overrunning the land and forming ill-defined areas of bogs and marshes. The canoes pushed through this swampy chaos until the river became deep and strong. Sauteaux tipis were pitched on shore, in the triangle formed by Netley Creek and the river. Dogs barked. Children yelled to the newcomers.

The river curved sharply around a point of land only once (near present-day Selkirk, Manitoba) before settling on a course to the southwest. At a ridge of pine trees, dark green against a brilliant sky, there were two large homesteads where retired HBC officers, James Bird

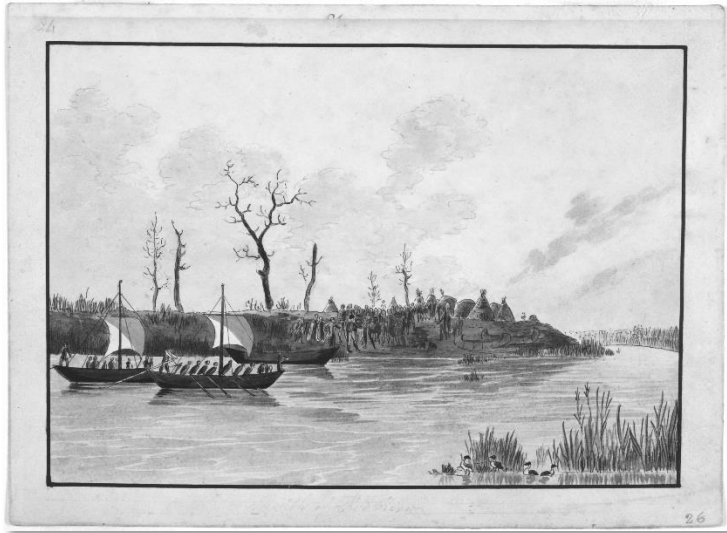
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<sup>124</sup> D. T. Lahey, *George Simpson: Blaze of Glory*. (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2011), p. 22. The author describes Simpson as 2"-4" taller than average with blue eyes and red hair.

<sup>125</sup> Jane's sister, Mary Isham, died in 1823-24 at Norway House. HBCA E.7/34 Servants Ledger

and Thomas Thomas, lived side by side. Then, on the western bank, there were log houses with boats and canoes moored at the water's edge. A church on the right bank. Another on the left.

The canoes turned right into the Assiniboine River, at a spot the locals called 'the Forks'. Fort Garry loomed in the distance, up the bank where numerous canoes and boats were pulled onto the sand. Jane's flotilla had arrived at the heart of the colony.



### *Peguis*

*A brigade of Swiss settlers passed Peguis' Saulteaux camp in 1821 on their way to the Red River Settlement.*

*Young artist, Peter Rindisbacher, sketched the scene and created a watercolor painting. (Library & Archives Canada)*

Jane and her family found a river lot, just north of Frog Plain, close to St. Paul's Anglican Church.<sup>126</sup> In 21<sup>st</sup> century Winnipeg, their lot would be situated in Rivergrove, a neighbourhood along the Red River between the Perimeter Highway on the north and Peguis Trail on the south. A well-worn trail used to cut through all the lots north of Fort Garry, running parallel to the river. In most cases, a log house and outbuildings were erected between the road and the river's edge.

The church was the cultural and social centre of their rural neighbourhood. The first Anglican minister had arrived in 1820 and built St. John's Church, which was still where most weddings and funerals took place. St. Paul's was new, but the Reverend David Jones was busy, convincing newcomers to be baptized and married, teaching former fur traders to farm the land, and ministering to his parishioners. Across the river in St. Boniface, the Catholic Church was the nucleus of a similar community of retired Nor'Westers, Canadian freemen, and Metis. It had been established in the colony when the first governor, himself a Catholic, had reasoned that it could bring order to the colony. Since then, clergy of both faiths considered it their mission to 'civilize' the people of the Northwest.

Jane and Adam Mowat were married in December 1825, on the same day that she was baptized.<sup>127</sup> By Christmas, the three children by Jane's first husband, Joseph Heywood, were also christened. The family was now well on its way to being integrated into Red River society.

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<sup>126</sup> Lot 181, Red River Census 1827

<sup>127</sup> Diocese of Rupert's Land, St. John's Anglican Church, Marriages, page 36, record 105



The Sisters      The Ferry      The Forks      Fort Garry      Site of Fort Gibraltar  
 Pontoons Bridge      French Half-breeds with Ox-carts  
 RED AND ASSINIBOINE RIVERS  
 FORT GARRY  
 (From Oil painting of Mr. W. Frank Lynn made in 1872, now in possession of the Author.)

### *The Forks*

*The area at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers is known as 'the Forks'.  
 (image – Bryce, *The Romantic Settlement of Lord Selkirk's Colonists*, p. 197)*

## May 1826 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

Indigenous elders may have known what to expect when the ice on the river began to rise on May 4, 1826, because there had been a major flood fifty years earlier. This one began in the same way – record snowfall the previous winter; unusually thick ice on the rivers; and a few days of warm weather. Their stories told of an old fort being washed away, one that had been beside the Red River for generations. (The flood of 1776 destroyed Fort Rouge, which la Vérendrye had built during the time of Jane's grandfather, James Isham.)

The winter of 1826 tested the mettle of everyone in the colony. A series of blizzards had created snowbanks up to five feet high. During each storm, the wind hurled the snow horizontally and swirled it in eddies wherever it encountered a building, fence, or cluster of willows. In places, the plains were scraped clean and in others, like Jane's log house, the snow piled up higher than the door. It was best to stay inside because men had been lost just trying to get from the house to the barn.

Jane and her neighbours must have been relieved when the temperatures rose in early May and it started to rain. According to the clerk at Fort Garry who maintained the post journal throughout the ordeal, the river rose five feet during the first twenty-four hours.<sup>128</sup> The ice was level with the top of the riverbank, but still it did not break. The flood waters were fed by local melting but also by similar conditions that drained the Red River watershed as far south as present-day Minnesota and North Dakota. The ice, the clerk noted, was 'so thick and strong that even the present flush of waters have not sufficient force to break it up'.

Two days later, on a Friday, the ice broke in a rush and the river overflowed its banks, carrying away cattle, houses, trees, and everything in its path. In the first half-hour, forty-seven houses disappeared as the inhabitants fled to higher ground. Water rushed into Fort Garry, where the men had moved the trading supplies to the upper rooms. Ice didn't enter the fort but instead piled up against the corner of the front bastion, creaking and groaning as it rubbed the log building. The flood waters increased that night and the next day, all the while running past the fort with 'immense masses' of ice mingled with debris. The HBC used canoes and boats to get from building to building within the fort and sent some out to save the settlers.

On the first Sunday of the three-week flood, the ice on the Assiniboine River broke up and an 'immense discharge of ice' flowed into the Red. Places of refuge along the smaller river were no longer safe so once again the people fled, leaving behind their cattle and possessions. To add to their fear and misery, the winds picked up and it rained heavily. Claps of thunder. Flashes of lightning.

The rivers were now clear of ice, but the water continued to rise. The Company's men and boats worked day and night 'snatching from watery graves' the settlers who were still trapped in their houses. Some were plucked from their rooftops. And still the waters rose. On Tuesday, the clerk noted that 'the whole country has assumed the appearance of a large lake'. Two days after that, the flood continued to rise, and people scrambled to new places of safety. 'All is bustle and confusion', the clerk wrote, 'Tempestuous wind with thunder, lightning and rain throughout the night'.

Fort Garry was abandoned on the twelfth day. The houses within its walls 'rock to and fro like a ship at sea, every joint opens, every beam bends'. The men's hopes for the buildings were dashed when the new block house was carried off. The fort now stands, the clerk wrote, 'like a castle of romance in the midst of an ocean of deep contending currents'.

Eventually the entire colony was evacuated to two areas of high ground – one near Sturgeon Creek (near present-day Little Mountain Park) and the other on Pine Hill (now Bird's Hill Park). People lived in tents supplied by the HBC and ate grain intended to seed new crops. They were cold, hungry, and tired. But the HBC's business was unaffected, the clerk wrote, 'the sales go on as briskly as if we were in the fort'.

More than two weeks after the flood began, as the water continued to rise, a storm blew down many of the tents in one of the camps. Perhaps Jane and her three children were among those the clerk described who were drenched by the rain. On Sunday, people prayed at the tents of the clergy while a strong gale blew out of the west. As if fate was testing their faith, the camp caught on fire. It was soon under control, the clerk noted with wry humour, 'there being plenty of help, and a good supply of water'.

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<sup>128</sup> HBCA, B.235/a/7, fos. 32d-46d. Extracts from Upper Fort Garry post journal, May – July 1826.

Finally, three weeks after it began, the flood peaked, and the water began to fall. Days later, the clerk reported the end of the inundation. 'As far as the eye can reach, the country is covered with water and driftwood ... few days have passed since the floods commenced, without storms of wind, thunder, lightning and torrents of rain. The waters first undermined the houses, the storms beat them to pieces, and the overpowering currents swept away the ruins.'

The flood of 1826 was the largest in recorded history in the Winnipeg area.<sup>129</sup> When the flood waters abated, all signs of the settlement had been purged except Fort Garry at the Forks, and it was severely damaged. As people returned to their farms to find their houses and barns gone, some decided to leave the settlement altogether. The Swiss, de Meurons and some Canadians left en masse; 240 people went to the United States and sixty to Canada. Others, like Jane's family, had nowhere to go and so they began to rebuild. To sow crops that may be too late to mature. To round up stray cattle. To begin again.

## August 1827 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

One year after the flood, the HBC conducted a census of the colony. Each record named the male head of the household and counted the other people living with him. Adam Mowat was living in a house on one acre of cultivated land; there was no barn or stable. In addition to his wife (Jane), there were two daughters over fifteen (Ann, Elizabeth), a son under sixteen (Charles) and a daughter under fifteen (Jane; half-sister to the other children). The family had one cow and one canoe; no carts, ploughs, or harrows.<sup>130</sup>

In contrast, James Bird who had retired to the colony in 1824 after years in the highest ranks of the HBC was living with his large family on sixteen cultivated acres across the river from the Mowat's. He had a house, a barn, and four stables with three horses, a mare, a bull, twelve cows, twelve oxen, eight calves and eleven swine. He had three carts, two ploughs, two harrows, one boat and a canoe. Sixteen children lived at home – nine sons and seven daughters. His older children were already setting up their own households.<sup>131</sup>

The residents of the colony survived by combining traditional hunting, fishing, and foraging with subsistence agriculture. Jane's husband had some experience with farming because he had been raised on the Orkney Islands where the people were described as 'farmers who fished'. He knew how to break the sod with only a shovel, to sow grain by broadcasting it by hand, and to reap the crop months later with a sickle. He fished with his brothers-in-law and dried the fish on racks over low smoky fires as Jane and her siblings had been taught by their Cree relatives. He gathered hay for the cow from the grasslands beyond the two-mile extent of his lot, harvested potatoes from the garden he and Jane had planted and gathered logs to make a barn. He hunted deer in the woods on the other side of the river and shot geese in Netley Marsh in the spring and fall.

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<sup>129</sup> The 1826 flood was seven feet higher than the 1950 flood, which was considered the "Flood of the Century".

<sup>130</sup> HBCA E.5.1 (1827) Census Returns for Red River Settlement and Grantown

<sup>131</sup> Joseph Bird, for example, had married Elizabeth Thomas and they had three young children on two cultivated acres on the west side of the Red River. I mention Joseph Bird because he and Elizabeth are my 4<sup>th</sup> great-grandparents.



Jane and the children milked the cow, churned the butter, tended the garden, and collected wild berries. They made moccasins and snowshoes, blanket coats and mittens. Jane made bannock, jams and hearty stews. She bought tea, sugar and oatmeal from the HBC fort with the small annuity she still received from her father's estate.

Throughout the colony, whether a woman was indigenous, Metis, or newly arrived from Scotland, she knew how to make bannock. Jane's recipe for the flat, round quick bread was no doubt like the one handed down to my mother. Jane would have started by grinding some wheat in a hand mill, like a coffee or spice mill. The coarse flour she produced was dark and nutty in comparison to the fine white flour my mother used. She measured five cups into a mixing bowl with a pinch of salt. Then, she added half a cup of lard or fat, and rubbed it into the flour to create crumbs. My mother added baking powder, but it didn't exist in Jane's time and there was no yeast in the colony. Jane then added two cups of water, whereas my mother used milk. She mixed the dough with her hands and kneaded it into a large ball. Then, she shaped it thin and round, pricked both sides with a fork, and placed it in a cast-iron frying pan. She baked it for ten minutes in the outdoor oven, if it was summer, or over the fireplace, if winter. The smell of fresh-baked bannock was no doubt a comfort to her, as it continued to be for my mother's generation.<sup>132</sup>

Pemmican was a staple food for the settlers just as it had been for the voyageurs, Nor'Westers, and HBC traders. Twice a year, in spring and in fall, almost a third of the colony left to hunt buffalo. The Great Buffalo Hunt was a family affair so among the seven hundred or so who went in 1827 many were women and children. Most of the hunters were French-speaking Metis but some English half-breeds joined in, too. A Catholic priest was also essential because they would be gone for about two months. Jane would have been aware of the hustle and bustle as carts were repaired, guns oiled and cleaned, and foodstuffs packed for the long trip.

The carts varied in size and shape according to the preferences of the builders, but they all followed a basic design – two wheels, five to six feet in diameter; an open box cart; and two parallel shafts that bracketed an ox or horse. Each was made entirely of wood and hide; the cargo was covered with hide or canvas. The axles were not lubricated so they squealed, wood on wood, like an untuned fiddle. Red River carts became a cultural icon for the era and nowadays are associated with the Metis and half-breeds of the Canadian prairies.

It's doubtful that Jane and her family ever went on a hunt; her husband was too old, and they didn't own a horse. But she would have known people who did, and she would have heard the stories. One such was recorded by Alexander Ross, a retired Nor'Wester who had arrived the same year as Jane.<sup>133</sup>

Buffalo hunting was not a solitary affair. The whole cavalcade stayed together, beginning with the first day when they crowded onto the public road that led to Pembina, about sixty miles south of Fort Garry. There, the Red River carts were placed side-by-side in a circle, Ross noted, and tents were erected inside in double and triple rows. The animals were kept inside the circle 'in all dangerous places', especially as they pushed further south into Sioux (Dakota) territory.

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<sup>132</sup> This recipe for bannock is my grandmother's. She noted that it was Mr. Bannerman's recipe.

<sup>133</sup> Alexander Ross. The Red River Buffalo Hunt from Red River Settlement. Manitoba Pageant, January 1960, vol. 5, no. 2

Upon arrival, they held a council to select captains and guides for the hunt, and a 'great war chief' or head man. This elite group laid down the rules for the hunt and enforced them.

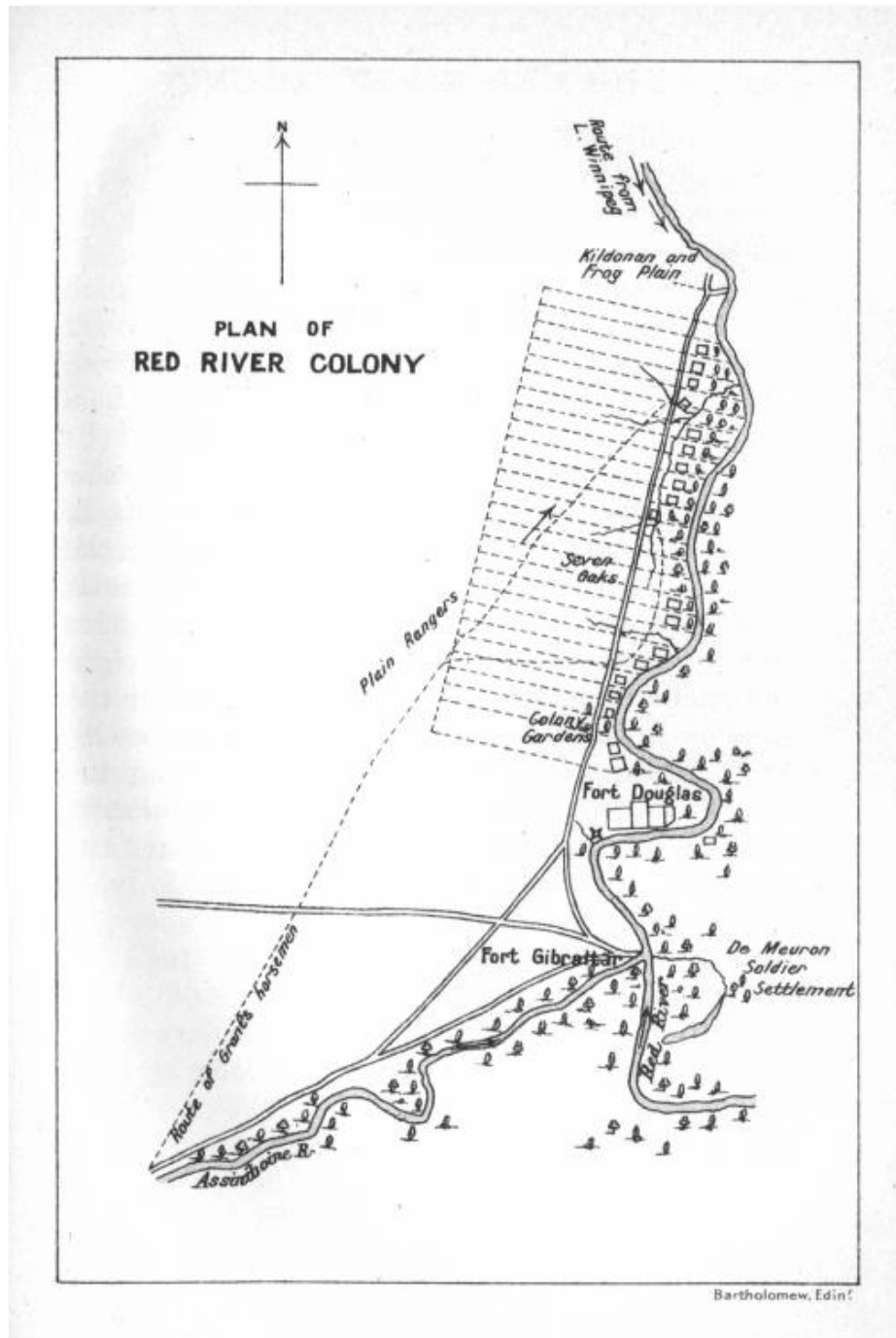
This scene was repeated over several days, as the hunters searched for the buffalo which travelled together in great herds and 'frequently shift their ground'. Each day, the line of carts stretched for five or six miles along the route the guides had selected. Each evening, they pulled them into a circle. With luck, they would spot a herd within two weeks of leaving the colony.

The buffalo race was a sight to behold. The huntsmen, all mounted on horses, lined up at one end of the camp and awaited the signal, 'Start!' They moved forward at a slow trot; the buffalo at this point were oblivious to the danger. Then, the horses and riders began to gallop. When they were within four or five hundred yards of the herd, with no way to conceal their approach on the flat prairie, 'the bulls curved their tails and pawed the ground'. Moments later, the herd took flight and the horses followed at full speed. The hunters moved among the chaotic herd of buffalo and, as Ross noted, 'Shots were heard, and all is smoke, dash, and hurry.' Within minutes, 'a thousand carcasses strewn the plain.'

Each hunter 'with coat off and shirt sleeves tucked up, commences skinning and cutting up the meat; with the knife in one hand, the bridle hanging in the other'. Men with carts, who had followed the hunters from the camp, then moved in to pick up the meat. They worked until nightfall when they had to leave the rest of the kill for the wolves. Back in the camp, the women took over and prepared the meat, skins, and pemmican. 'Their duty', Ross admitted, 'is a most laborious one'.

About two months after they embarked, the buffalo hunters returned to the colony. Each cart carried about 900 pounds of buffalo meat. The HBC bought a great deal each year but most of it was for the hunters and their families. It's likely that Jane's family bartered some of their farm and garden produce for meat and pemmican, even though they didn't participate in the hunt.

The early settlers in the Red River colony, both immigrants from Britain and those born in Rupert's Land, developed many ways to acquire food locally because the only imported supplies came from the HBC. The cluster of about two hundred houses counted in the 1830 census was the only permanent settlement in all the lands we now call the Canadian prairies and the American mid-west. It would be more than a decade before wagon trains would venture west along the Oregon Trail from Missouri to Idaho, and four decades before Canadians migrated from their villages along the shores of Lakes Erie and Ontario. The colony, therefore, was isolated, unable to trade with similar communities and beyond the reach of more immigrants. Everyone in Red River needed to be resourceful and creative to survive.



### River Lots

*The lots were narrow so that everyone could access the river. The first two miles from the bank of the river was used for crops, gardens and a house. Beyond that, farmers could access the hay privilege which was another two miles on which hay was collected. Everyone used the Commons or open prairie to graze cattle. (Map: Bryce, *The Romantic Settlement of Lord Selkirk's Colonists*, p. 124)*

## October 1832 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

The colony had grown along the banks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers in clusters around churches, like beads on a necklace. Altogether, there were 2700 people in 445 houses. Each parish was either Catholic or Anglican; the census in 1832 tallied 1508 Catholics and 1243 Protestants. Jane's parish of St. Paul's was between St. John's on the south and St. Andrew's on the north. Most of the people in these interconnected Anglican parishes were like Jane, children of HBC men and their indigenous wives. Closer to the Forks and Fort Garry, in Kildonan, were the farms of the original Scottish settlers brought over by Lord Selkirk. Across the river in St. Boniface, the French-speaking Metis flocked around the original Catholic church. Another Catholic enclave had appeared on the Assiniboine river near White Horse Plain when the Metis at Pembina moved into Grantown (later called St. François Xavier).

As Jane's children became old enough to marry, she no doubt began to look around for suitable mates. Their choices were limited by more than religion and less by language because, whether English or French-speaking, most people also spoke Cree. (80% of the population had been born in Rupert's Land of indigenous mothers.) Social standing was another factor to be considered. The social hierarchy was like that in Britain where those at the top were wealthy, educated men in positions of power. In the colony, that included the men currently employed by the HBC, the retired HBC men, the priests, and a few British-born and Canadian entrepreneurs. Women, there and in Britain, were expected to marry and have children. The only ones who followed a different path in Red River were the Catholic nuns and the schoolteachers. Ethnicity was not a consideration in choosing a mate; men of high and low status alike had indigenous wives. That is, until George Simpson decided to move his headquarters to the colony.

Jane had last seen Simpson at Norway House during the merger of the two fur trade companies. In the intervening years, he had travelled to almost every post in the Northwest, including west of the Rocky Mountains in the Pacific region and New Caledonia. He had moved the HBC headquarters from York Factory to Lachine, the depot for brigades going west, where he would be closer to the business centre of Montreal and it was easier to go to England. In 1830, he came to Red River with his new English wife expecting to make Lower Fort Garry his headquarters. Simpson, in his forties, had just married his eighteen-year-old cousin, Frances. They moved into the governor's mansion which was the first building in the still-to-be-completed stone fort. Their effect on the social dynamics of the settlement was chilling.

Simpson revealed his biases against 'half-breeds' early in his career as Governor of Rupert's Land, as he jotted down his private notes about each employee. A man might be 'tolerable for a halfbreed', Simpson wrote many times, but unworthy of advancement. He had created a rigid hierarchy in which officers were superior to servants, as in the early days of James Isham and others. His opinions hardened in the following years, so he created a new position, postmaster, that ranked just below clerk. This was the highest position a man born in Rupert's Land could expect to achieve. Many, including some officers, thought this was demeaning and they openly opposed the policy. Some who could advance no higher left the HBC altogether.<sup>134</sup> (Even so, nothing changed until 1875.) Simpson also opposed marriages between HBC men and native

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<sup>134</sup> Denise Fuchs, 'Embattled Notions: Constructions of Rupert's Land's Native Sons, 1760 to 1860', (Thesis: U. of Manitoba, 2000)

women even though he had several short-term country wives and casual partners in Rupert's Land. When he moved to the Red River with his new wife, he decided that non-white wives would not be allowed in his social circle.<sup>135</sup>

Imagine the impact of his discrimination on local people. As word spread throughout the colony that only white women could visit the Governor's house in Lower Fort Garry, many people would have had similar conversations. Some women, like Elizabeth Bird who lived across the river from Jane, had lived comfortable lives in HBC forts as wives of the men in charge. Elizabeth not only attended all the soirees and parties at the forts but, as wife of the chief factor, she played hostess at most of them. So, when Simpson announced that Indian and mixed-blood women were no longer welcome at the Governor's house, she and women like her were offended.

Jane was likely most upset about the impact of Simpson's prejudice on her daughters' prospects for marriage. Ann and Elizabeth were typical of most third-generation mixed-blood girls who retained cultural practices from both their Cree grandmothers and British or French grandfathers. A few men followed Simpson's lead and married white women, sometimes replacing an existing long-term relationship to do so. Most, however, ignored his decree.

The Simpson's left the colony three years later and went to England. Frances had few friends and was grief-stricken from losing her first baby. She never returned to the settlement, staying instead in England for five years and then joining her husband in Lachine where he had set up a luxurious household for them. They left behind the seeds of racial discrimination in a community already divided along religious and fur trade company lines.

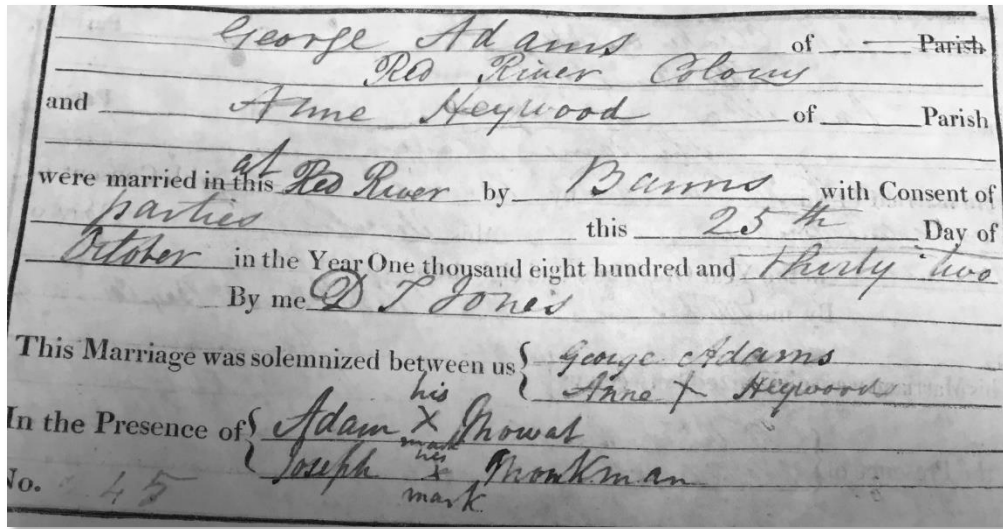
Jane's three children by Joseph Heywood all married, had children, and lived long lives. The first to marry was Ann. Her chances of finding a suitable husband were limited because Red River was small, and her family was low on the social hierarchy. George Adams was a good match even though he was seventeen years older. He was the son of a rope maker at the docks in London and had arrived at Red River with the 1815 group of Selkirk settlers, the same year that Ann was born. He had not yet acquired his own river lot because, in the beginning, he worked for other farmers until he knew enough to begin working his own land. Like many others, he selected a vacant plot and didn't worry about gaining title to it. He lived with another bachelor and, by the time Ann agreed to marry him, had five acres under cultivation. George could read and write; he could do basic arithmetic. He attended church regularly at St. Paul's and was friends with several of the first settlers in the colony.

George would also have had difficulty finding a mate because men outnumbered women in the colony and he had no property. Ann was young and attractive with fair skin, long brown hair and hazel eyes. She knew how to cook and sew, tend the garden and feed the animals, and serve tea and scones to neighbours who dropped by to visit. She couldn't read or write but she was clever. Her family was British although her mother and uncles spoke Cree. She also attended St. Paul's and the priest there approved of the match. No details of the wedding exist except the church record.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Sir George Simpson

<sup>136</sup> Diocese of Rupert's Land, St. John's Anglican Church. Marriages 1830 record #245



*Marriage of George Adams & Ann Heywood*

*On October 25, 1832, when she was seventeen, Ann married George Adams in St. John's Anglican Church. The Rev. David Jones performed the ceremony on a Thursday, following local tradition. Adam Mowat and Joseph Monkman were witnesses. (St. John's Anglican Church, record #105)*

## July 1835 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

By 1835, Jane's family was surrounded by progress on their small farm in the Red River Settlement. There were one hundred more houses in the colony and almost a thousand more people than three years earlier when Jane's daughter, Ann, had married. Similar growth was occurring in all parishes as the next generation set up their own households. There had been one windmill at the time of the great flood of '26, but now there were sixteen – one near the Forks, one in St. Boniface, one in Grantown, and thirteen in the interconnected Anglican parishes of St. John's, St. Paul's, and St. Andrew's. Great canvas sails perched on round towers, broader at the bottom than the top, turned the millstones within to make flour. Jane and her neighbours continued to live in modest log homes, but they had more animals, larger gardens, and more land cultivated for wheat. The HBC was building a new fort to replace Fort Garry, which had been damaged in the flood. Twenty miles north, Lower Fort Garry was being built of local limestone; the fur loft, warehouse, trading office, and governor's residence were complete.

The Mowat's continued to live at a subsistence level but had developed more ways to acquire and produce food. There were six in the family – Jane, her husband, two daughters, their son, and his new wife. They had four acres of grain, according to the census, which fell short of an adequate amount of about one acre per person.<sup>137</sup> They likely had an extensive garden as well, with vegetables native to North America, such as potatoes, pumpkins, beans,

<sup>137</sup> Norma Jean Hall, *A Casualty of Colonialism*, ch. 2: Red River Farming, 'Knowing the Soil'

squash, tomatoes, and corn; as well as imported plants, such as carrots, cabbage, onions, turnips, beets and peas. They gathered mushrooms and nuts, as well as berries, from the wild. They had cows, calves, oxen and a few pigs. They continued to hunt and fish; they bartered with neighbours; and purchased supplies from the HBC store and McDermot's store.

Jane's family lived, as many did, on the cusp of plenty and starvation, so they had to adapt in uncertain times. A cascade of failures in the fall of 1836 likely taxed their ingenuity. It began in August with a severe frost that destroyed the crops and blackened the leaves of the garden vegetables. Then, the annual HBC ship left York Factory without unloading the supplies for the colony when a storm threatened to pull it apart. September was 'cold, drizzly, and frosty', conditions that made it impossible to stock up on fish for the winter.<sup>138</sup> This triple threat was unusual, but the people in the colony had long experience with crop failures from floods, grasshoppers, disease, and the short growing season. They persevered.

There had been stories of starvation since the first Europeans travelled inland and so, at times like these, the myths, memories, and legends circulated in the colony. Remember, someone would say, when they had to boil their leather laces to make soup? And so it would begin, each story more outrageous than the last, until the room echoed with laughter.

Everyone would have been busy in the days after the killing frost, trying to save what they could. The animals on Jane's farm – two cows, a calf, three oxen, and four pigs – were rounded up and sheltered in the stable and barn. Root vegetables, such as turnips and potatoes, were dug up and stored in a small cellar under the floorboards of the house. Jane would have taken stock of her supplies, especially flour which would be in short supply in the coming months. Perhaps she bought a few things at the HBC store with the annuity from her late father, but the shelves there were almost bare. She extended the food by watering down the soup, serving meals without meat, and offering smaller portions to everyone. She may have been like my mother who served my father and the six children before she made a plate of food for herself. As the winter closed in, the men may have gone hunting, only to find that the snow was too deep to track deer, or their prey had died from the extreme weather. Perhaps they were forced to kill some of their own animals.

Jane's extended family could help in precarious times like these. Her daughter, Ann, and George Adams may have shared some of their flour because they produced more than they needed. Her daughter, Elizabeth, may have spent a few months working for one of the wealthy families in the settlement (which could explain why she wasn't counted in the census that year). Jane's brother, Thomas, may have shared buffalo meat and pemmican. (He had two carts which suggests that he joined the spring and fall buffalo hunt). Her son, Charles Heywood, had married into a large clan that year which extended Jane's family network even farther. Margaret Cook was the granddaughter of William Hemmings Cook, a seventy-year-old retired HBC officer and former chief factor, who had four sons and seven daughters. Everyone in her ever-widening circle felt responsible for Jane and her family, and she for them.

There were many other people in the colony who would also help in a time of need. There were the retired HBC men who had known Jane's father, men like James Bird who had been chief factor at Edmonton House when Charles was posted there. Bird also had a large family and his adult children likely knew Jane. There were friends (who can be determined from

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<sup>138</sup> Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, p. 188

marriage and census records), such as Henry Buxton, a young farmer married to Frances Thomas; Joseph Monkman, owner of the salt works, married to Isabella Setter; and William Garrioch, retired schoolteacher, married to Nancy Cook.<sup>139</sup> There were the parishioners of St. Paul's Anglican Church, who were also Jane's neighbours. Jane felt responsible for everyone in her circle, and they also looked out for her.

The winter of 1836 began with calamity and the dread of starvation, but from November to January it was mild, with little snow.<sup>140</sup> But, the damage had been done – no freshly ground flour, no new HBC supplies, and no fish.

Despite the crop failure, life was more secure in the colony in 1836, fifteen years after the merger when hostilities ceased between the two fur trade companies. Residents were beginning to gossip about the tight grip of the HBC, however. The Company was the economic patron of the community and the master at Fort Garry had been an arbiter of petty disputes among colonists. Otherwise, the settlement ran smoothly on good manners and cooperation. When George Simpson visited the colony shortly after the Selkirk estate sold Assiniboia back to the HBC, however, he saw a lawless, uncivilized mass of half-breeds that 'required great good management if it was not to become dangerous'.<sup>141</sup> The HBC was the de facto government now, so he set about to establish law and order and address problems related to fences, trespassing animals, fires, harvesting hay, horse theft, and the sale of liquor to Indians. He reorganized the Council of Assiniboia, which like a modern city council could pass laws and enforce them, and appointed several of the most influential men to it. They were all HBC appointees, people grumbled, and the bylaws favoured the Company. Simpson also established a volunteer corps organized along military lines to keep the peace and added a recorder (lawyer/judge) to the Company payroll. Resentment simmered across the colony.

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<sup>139</sup> William Garrioch was a witness at Jane's marriage to Adam Mowat in 1825. Henry Buxton and Joseph Monkman were witnesses at Ann's wedding to George Adams in 1832. Garrioch (1787-ca1849), from the Orkney Islands, worked for the HBC as a writer and trader until 1822 when he retired to the Red River settlement. At the time of Jane's wedding, he was schoolteacher at St. John's parish school. He married Nancy, a daughter of William Hemmings Cook. Buxton (1794-1870), from Stavely, Derbyshire, had shared a house and farm with George Adams when they were young bachelors. He married Frances Thomas., daughter of Thomas Thomas. Monkman (1810-1899) was the son of James Monkman from Yorkshire, England, and his indigenous wife. He had inherited the salt works on Lake Winnipegosis from his father.

<sup>140</sup> Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, p. 188

<sup>141</sup> Simpson to London Committee, 1824. Bill Waiser, *A World We Have Lost*, (Markham: Fifth House, 2016) p. 339





*Fort Garry Gate 1836*

*Perhaps the Mowat family attended New Year's celebrations at Upper Fort Garry in 1836 when the Sixth Regiment of Foot protected the colony. They likely gathered along the edge of the frozen Red River to watch the horse races that were held every New Year's Day. (Image: HBC Collection)*

*Fort Garry Gate 2016*

*My sister and I visited the Fort Garry gate in 2016. (photo – P. Redhead)*



## June 1840 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

Jane's farm was home to eleven people in 1840 – she, Adam Mowat and their teenage daughter, as well as the families of two of her three children by Joseph Heywood. Elizabeth, the most recent to marry, had a two-year-old daughter with James Knight Jr, half-breed son of an HBC servant from Orkney and the native-born daughter of Henry Hallett, who had worked alongside Jane's father<sup>142</sup>. Charles and his wife had three children. On days when her daughter, Ann, came to visit, there were four more grandchildren in Jane's world. It was common practice among early settlers for adult children to live at home until they could establish their own farms. By 1843, all three Heywood children were living on their own farms with their growing families. Jane and her husband were aging by then – she was forty-seven; he, sixty-six – and the farm showed it. They had no animals and only three acres plowed. Jane's daughter with Mowat was sixteen but no longer lived with them. There was a young boy but it's unlikely he was their son. Perhaps they had taken him in, adopted him so to speak, which was common in those times.<sup>143</sup>

Jane's family is an example of how the people of Red River became connected through marriage, the English-speaking Protestants creating a web of relationships and the French-speaking Catholics forming another. The two groups had much in common, especially their indigenous heritage, and could communicate in Cree or variations, such as Michif (French and Cree) or Bungee (English and Cree). French Metis and English half-breeds also connected through commerce.

The only contact people had with the world beyond Rupert's Land in the first twenty-five years of the colony was provided by the HBC. Once a year in late summer, the canoes would arrive from York Fort with correspondence and packages tucked in among the new supplies for Fort Garry. There is no evidence that either Jane's husband, with family in the Orkney Islands, or her son-in-law, with family in London, corresponded with people back home, but if they did, the pace of communication would have been the same as it had been for Jane's grandfather, James Isham, one hundred years earlier. In addition to personal correspondence, some people ordered items from Britain that the HBC did not stock and sold them to residents at a profit. These 'petty traders', along with Andrew McDermot who had a storefront operation, placed similar orders with merchants in Montreal; the packages were delivered with the summer canoes or the winter dog sled couriers of the HBC.

Freighting became a lucrative business for some of the residents. When a canoe or York boat brigade arrived from York Factory, Montreal, or forts such as Edmonton, a long line of Red River carts would be on the banks of the River to meet them. The supplies from London or Montreal, or the furs from inland forts, would be transported to Fort Garry where the freighters had contracts with the HBC. Some men owned several carts, which they also used for the seasonal buffalo hunts. (Census records suggest that my fourth great-grandfather, William

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<sup>142</sup> James Knight Jr's father was James Knight (1783-1854). His mother was Sophia Hallett, daughter of Henry Hallett.

<sup>143</sup> Red River census, 1843

Bruce, was a freighter. In 1840, he had seven carts.<sup>144</sup>) It was the freighters and free traders who eventually found other ways to circumvent the HBC's control of trade.

American settlement had reached as far west and north as Fort Snelling and neighbouring St. Paul (Minneapolis, Minnesota), which could be reached by travelling south along the Red River. The river valley offered a natural north-south corridor through what is now North Dakota and Minnesota, to the headwaters of the Mississippi. The freighters were already going south to Pembina to hunt buffalo, so it wasn't long before a few carts ventured all the way to Fort Snelling. By the 1840s, hundreds of Red River carts, in trains as long as two miles, were transporting furs, buffalo robes, and agricultural produce south and bringing seed, spices, tools, implements, hardware, and liquor north to the colony. They also carried mail and packages that had been delivered by the US Postal Service to their American destination. It took about six weeks to complete the journey, but the trade was so lucrative that some freighters also used dog teams to make winter runs to St. Paul.

The Red River Trails originated with the indigenous people and went through either Sioux or Saulteaux territory, depending on the route. The Sioux inhabited the borderlands from the Yellowstone River (in North Dakota and Montana) to the Qu'Appelle River (in southern Saskatchewan). The Oyate, meaning 'the people', were several related but distinct groups, principally the 'Minnesota Sioux' (Dakotas) and the 'Missouri Sioux' (Lakotas, Yanktons, Yanktonais). The Sioux had been allies of the British during the War of 1812 and had their ancestors' medals to prove it. Because of this and ill-treatment by American traders, they preferred to trade with the HBC and made several trips to the Red River Settlement over the years. Each time they came, the leaders of the colony tried to control the situation because the local Saulteaux were enemies of the Sioux. The Sioux also had an unpredictable relationship with the Metis, trading with them to acquire powder, guns, and liquor one time, and threatening them when they encroached on their territory during the buffalo hunt at other times. Some years, the freighters needed to take a longer route to St. Paul to avoid Sioux territory altogether.<sup>145</sup>

Jane's family likely participated in this underground economy, as did most people in the colony. Although she and Adam had nothing to spare, her brother and son-in-law produced surpluses. The HBC bought flour each year but only a few farmers benefitted from this market. Others could now look south of the border and soon most people had tools and luxuries not available locally. The HBC men complained of smuggling, where the Metis and half-breeds called it 'free trading'.

At about this time, another group of Red River carts left the colony, but this one was going south-west to Oregon country. The area along the Columbia River was disputed territory, occupied by both British and American fur traders, but so many American settlers began to claim land in the region that George Simpson decided to enhance the British presence there. He recruited English half-breed James Sinclair to take twenty-three families from Red River to

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<sup>144</sup> Red River Census 1840. William Bruce, son of Benjamin Bruce from the Orkney Islands, and a Cree woman, married Frances Allory.

<sup>145</sup> David G. McGrady, *Living with Strangers – The Nineteenth-Century Sioux and the Canadian-American Borderlands*, (Toronto: U. of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 38, 45

Oregon. Among them was Henry Buxton, a close friend of Jane's son-in-law.<sup>146</sup> This move addressed other concerns that worried Simpson. He thought the colony was getting too large to be managed well, and Sinclair, an independent trader and partner of store-owner McDermot, was so influential that he might rally the Anglo half-breeds to take a stand against the Company's monopoly on trade.<sup>147</sup> Sinclair returned to Red River after leading the families to Oregon, however, and continued to pose a threat to Simpson and the HBC.

George Simpson, who travelled regularly by canoe among the forts in his care, going from Lachine to Red River to Edmonton and the Columbia, made two trips beyond North America at this time. In 1838, he went to St. Petersburg and negotiated a treaty with the Russian American Company, which had been operating in North America (present-day Alaska) since 1800. The HBC agreed to provide the Russian base at Sitka with provisions in exchange for a lease on the Alaskan panhandle, the south-east portion along the Pacific coast. Three years later, Simpson launched a journey around the world from London, across North America, to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), back to Alaska, across Siberia, through Europe, and back to London. The trip took almost twenty months during which he visited many HBC posts in the Columbia and Alaska regions, closing redundant forts and finding other efficiencies along the way.

Although the Red River Settlement was more connected to the world in the 1840s, it was still not accessible for immigrants from Europe. A trickle of visitors began to pass through, most wealthy sons of British aristocracy on hunting trips for exotic big game, such as bison. A few Metis and half-breeds benefitted by guiding the travellers on the hunt, but otherwise, people like Jane and her family were not affected by the strangers. Some of the young men wrote about their exploits when they returned to Britain, usually painting a romantic picture of life in the Northwest. As their stories spread, the English-speaking world slowly became aware of Rupert's Land and the Red River Settlement. The quiet isolation of the colony was about to end.

## August 1845 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

Word spread throughout the colony in August 1845, that a group of independent traders planned to confront the HBC about recent attempts to block their activities. There were many petty traders who had become middlemen between indigenous traders and the Company, in much the same way as the Cree and Assiniboine had been at York Fort years earlier. The richest among them was Andrew McDermot and his partner, James Sinclair, who had a special license to import goods on HBC ships and sell the furs they traded at Fort Garry. The system began to break down when an American trader built a post at Pembina in 1843 and began paying higher prices for pelts. Soon most traders were taking their business south of the border.

The 'smugglers', as the HBC saw them, had to be stopped. The Council of Assiniboia, whose members were all HBC appointees, passed laws imposing tariffs on imports and exports. To get title to a plot of land, settlers had to promise not to trade in furs. Those suspected of free trading, had their mail opened and their houses searched. The special license of partners McDermot and Sinclair was cancelled, and their freighting contract was terminated. Notices

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<sup>146</sup> Henry Buxton and George Adams lived together in the early years when both were bachelors. Buxton was a witness at Adams' wedding to Ann Heywood.

<sup>147</sup> Dale Gibson, *Law, Life, and Government at Red River*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), p. 79

were posted around the colony at churches, the courthouse, and Fort Garry, proclaiming the Company's monopoly of the fur trade.

Jane and her husband would have chatted with friends and neighbours about the escalating situation. Resident and local historian, Alexander Ross, called it 'gossiping', but sharing ideas over a cup of tea and passing on news at McDermot's store kept everyone informed at a time before the colony had a newspaper. People like Jane's son-in-law, George Adams, who had lived in the settlement since the beginning, may have told stories about another time of conflict between the people and the fur trade companies. George had been there during the Battle of Seven Oaks in which twenty men were killed by followers of the old NWC. He had fled with everyone to Jack River House, fearing for his life. Would this time also lead to violence and bloodshed, people wondered.

McDermot and Sinclair called a meeting of free traders in August. They and the nineteen men present composed a list of questions for the governor at Fort Garry, asking for clarification about the new trading rules. They based their case for free trade on an argument that is still being debated in Canadian courts today. As Metis and half-breeds, they claimed, we have the right to trade furs because we are indigenous. The governor responded that they were British subjects and had no more rights than someone from England or Scotland. Undeterred, the free traders tried something else.

In October, McDermot's nephew delivered a petition with 1250 signatures to Washington asking to be admitted to Iowa territory as citizens. The Americans rejected their plea.<sup>148</sup>

By February, the free traders had sent off another petition, this time to London. Two influential French-Canadians had joined the group by this time, bringing together the French and English communities in a common cause. Louis Riel (senior) had arrived in the settlement two years earlier but was already recognized as a leader among the French-speaking traders. Father George-Antoine Bellecourt was likely the one who wrote the petition (in French) that was signed by 977 residents. (At the time of this meeting, Riel had an infant son with Julie Lagimodière.) The petition and an explanatory letter in English demanded that the colony be governed according to the principles in the British Constitution, which included free trade as it was practiced elsewhere in the British Empire. The British Colonial office wasn't sure how to handle the concerns listed in the petition because the Red River Settlement was not in their jurisdiction, so after consulting with the HBC, it concluded that there was no problem. Once again, the free traders' claim of indigenous rights had been rejected.

At the same time as the petition was making its way through the bureaucracy of the Colonial Department, another request from the Red River Settlement had reached London. George Simpson, convinced that the colony was about to erupt in violence and fearful that the Americans were poised to take over the disputed Oregon territory, requested that troops be sent to Red River.

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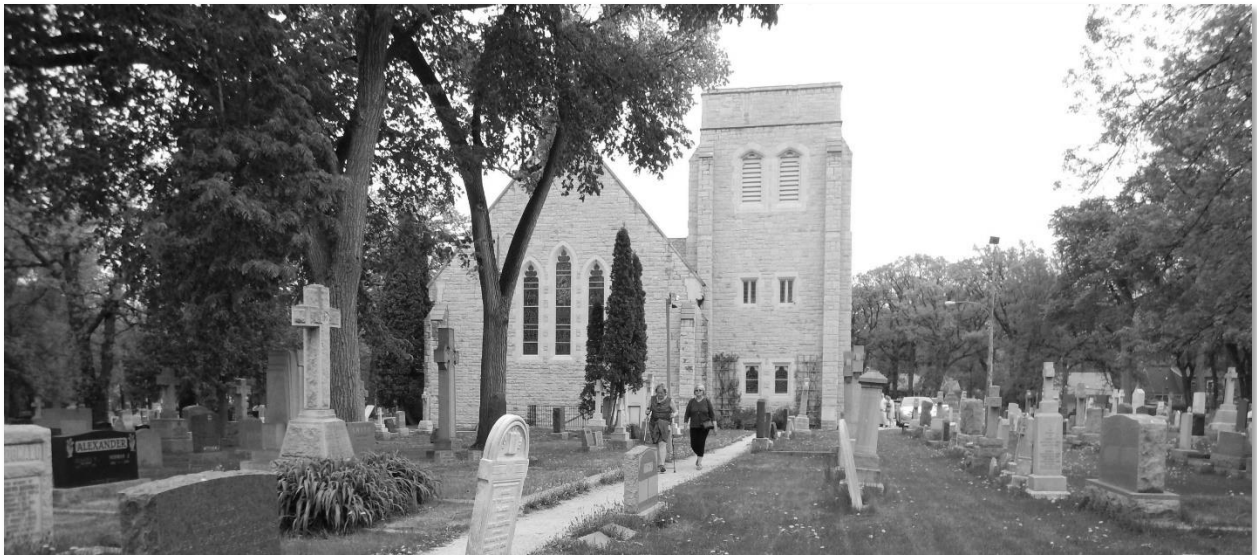
<sup>148</sup> Rich, *The Fur Trade and the Northwest to 1857*, p. 263. John McLaughlin took the petition to Washington in 1845.

## February 1847 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

Jane died sometime between 1843 and 1848, when her husband, Adam Mowat, was listed in the census as living with Ann and George Adams.<sup>149</sup>

St. John's Cathedral today sits at the southern end of the original Kildonan lots of those brought to North America by Lord Selkirk. The graveyard surrounds the building and, were it not for a few groomed paths, the deceased would occupy the entire area. I imagine in Jane's day, there was room to hold a picnic, to let the children run free after the confinement of church, to wander easily among the few graves of the earliest settlers. I see her adult children and her aging husband standing by her modest headstone, grieving for a mother and grandmother who died too young. I join in their sorrow.

My sisters and I walked through that historic graveyard recently, listening for the whispers of our ancestors. Perhaps, it was Jane who sent a thrill up my spine.



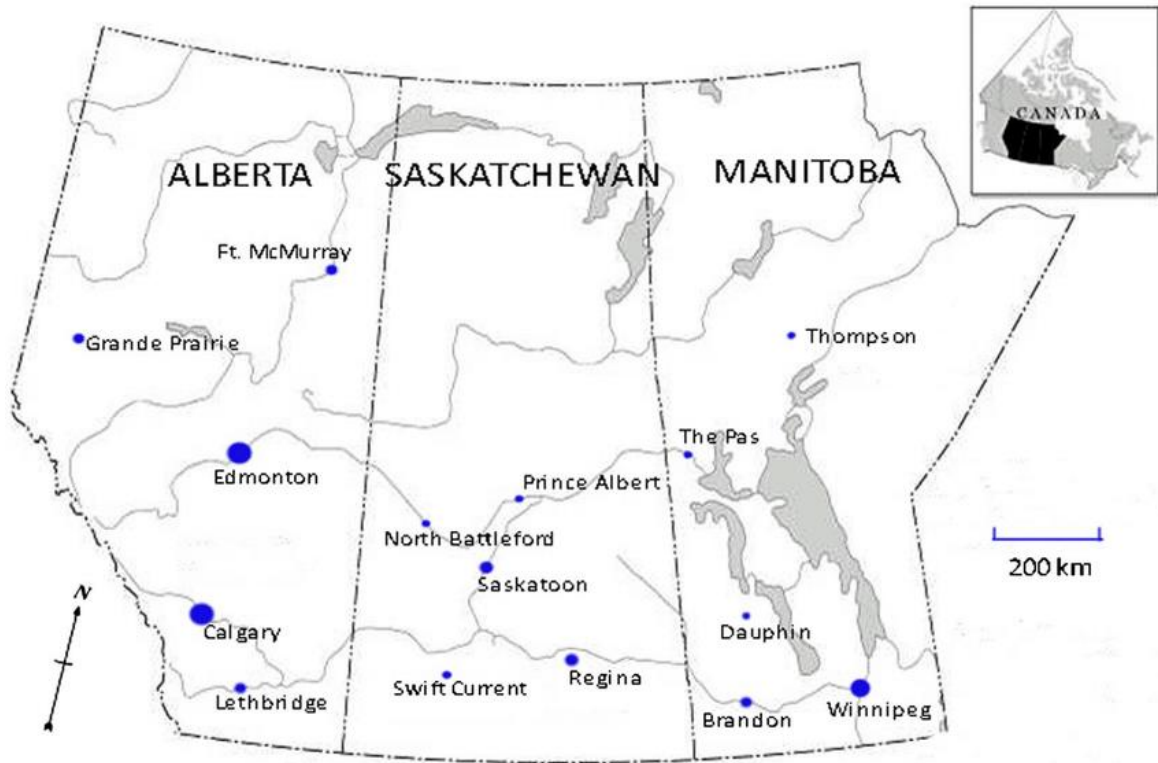
*St. John's Anglican Cathedral, Winnipeg*

*St. John's was the first Anglican Church in the Red River Settlement. The present cathedral building dates to 1926, but the graveyard which surrounds it has been in use since the early 1800s. (photo-P. Redhead)*

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<sup>149</sup> Red River census, 1848

## Chapter Four: Ann Heywood Adams (1815-1898)



*Places – Ann Heywood Adams*

*Ann's story began in Norway House where she was born. She moved to the Red River Settlement (now Winnipeg) at the age of ten, and after she married, to High Bluff (west of Winnipeg). Finally, at age 67, she moved with her adult children to the Prince Albert area. The provincial borders on this map did not exist in her lifetime but help a modern reader to locate the places she lived. (map – Yale Belanger, researchgate.net)*



## February 1847 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

Families tell certain stories repeatedly, so I imagine that Ann's family did, too. My grandparents liked to tell how they met – she was five and he was three when he first kissed her. Ann had met George Adams at Jack River House when a group of Selkirk Settlers stopped to rest on their way to the new colony. Neither took notice of the other, however, because she was only an infant and he was eighteen. George may have told the children that 1815 was an unusual year. It was dark at mid-day when he boarded the HBC ship in London, and a comet was hanging in the sky over Ann's small community when he arrived there. (The two natural events were unrelated. A cloud of volcanic ash hung over London from the eruption of Mount Tambora in the Philippines. It caused crop failures and wide-spread starvation in a 'year without summer', as it would be called.)

By 1847, Ann had been married to George for fifteen years and, at thirty-two, had survived seven pregnancies. Their eldest, Ann Nancy, was thirteen and there were five boys – George, Charles, Joseph, James, and Henry. William had died three years earlier at age four. Ann's stepfather, Adam Mowat, also lived with the family. They had a farm of twenty acres<sup>150</sup> in St. Paul's parish, with a barn and stable for the horse, two cows, two oxen, and four pigs.<sup>151</sup> They were typical of those in the Red River Settlement who had adapted to an agricultural lifestyle in that they lived well, produced more than they needed, and shared the excess with family and neighbours in need.

In 1847, Ann's youngest boy died. Henry had been born the previous year at the height of a series of epidemics in the colony. In January 1846, influenza was widespread and by May measles was spreading north along the Red River. The most devastating epidemic began in June, just as Ann's baby was born. Whole families became ill with the 'bloody flux' as writers of the time called it. Dysentery symptoms included diarrhoea, fever, nausea and vomiting. The death toll that summer was on average seven a day, often taking several people in the same household.

Fear spread throughout Red River. One writer who lived through the epidemic said there was "not a smiling face in a summer's day. Hardly anything to be seen but the dead on their way to their last home; nothing to be heard but the tolling of bells, and nothing talked of but the sick, the dying, and the dead."<sup>152</sup> The widow Thomas, who had been a friend of Ann's mother, died the same year, perhaps another victim of the epidemic. All in all, 321 people died, one in sixteen in the small colony.

Some speculate the epidemic was cholera, which was still common in Europe. Two years later, 65,000 people would die of it in England alone. Little was known of bacteria or viruses, so it was thought to spread through the air. Some people believed it was a punishment from God. Current scientific evidence concludes it was shigellosis, or bacillary dysentery. Conditions were right – poor sanitation, inadequate personal hygiene, and a population weakened by the flu and measles. Vulnerable populations included babies, such as young Henry.

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<sup>150</sup> On April 20, 1835, the HBC granted George Adams a lot of 50 acres (#168) but it's likely they had been working the land for a few years before that.

<sup>151</sup> Red River Census, 1847

<sup>152</sup> Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, p. 363

Health care in the colony was minimal. The HBC doctor at Fort Garry would have used common techniques such as purging and bleeding. The Grey Nuns, who had arrived in the colony two years before, closed their schools and travelled house to house, helping Catholic families with symptoms and teaching them about cleanliness. Ann likely called upon a local healer/nurse who used herbal remedies and other traditional approaches passed down from her indigenous and Orcadian ancestors. In the end, nothing worked, and baby Henry died.

By late September, the three epidemics had run their course. Miles away in Norway House and other parts of Rupert's Land, however, people were dying of measles, spread by the HBC transport brigades travelling to York Factory to meet the annual supply ship.

## June 1847 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

Ann may have met the tall young military officer who spent nine months in the colony on more than one occasion. Lieutenant-Colonel John F. Crofton arrived with almost 350 officers and men of the Sixth Regiment of Foot, an elite infantry force that had seen action in Pakistan and other foreign spots. They had been sent out to the colony in response to George Simpson's warning that the Americans were about to attack and claim the entire Northwest. By the time they arrived, however, the Oregon Treaty had been signed and the regiment had nothing to do.

Perhaps Ann saw the boats pass by her farm on a crisp fall day in October, on their way to Fort Garry where Crofton established his headquarters. She would have seen six boats, one of five such groups, each filled with soldiers and supplies and paddled by experienced 'native tripmen'. Other groups were already at Lower Fort Garry where half of the men would live. They had brought 300 tons of equipment and supplies from Ireland on two military ships, but most of it remained at York Factory because there wasn't room in the boats. (There were, for example, 420 iron bedsteads.)

During the two years that the regiment was in town, Red River experienced a small economic boom. Storeowner McDermot sold them lots of supplies, as did most of the local farmers. Perhaps Ann saw Crofton when she delivered potatoes and turnips from her garden. People in the colony also provided the troops with moccasins, fur caps with ear flaps, fur mittens, and buffalo cloaks to help them survive a prairie winter. The free traders, who had continued to trade across the border in contravention of the HBC's trade monopoly, caused little trouble for the Company during these years because their energies were diverted to legitimate trade with Crofton's troops.

Crofton maintained discipline and found ways to alleviate boredom so that the residents of Red River had only good things to say about his men. The daily routine began with a parade and drills at 10:00 am, after which the officers inspected the barracks. Later, at 4:00 pm, there was roll call followed by mess (evening meal) from 6:00 to 8:00 pm. There was so little wine or spirits in the colony that drinking wasn't a problem. On cold days, outdoor activities were cancelled and Crofton organized reading and writing groups with specific instructions that good readers should read aloud for the benefit of those who were illiterate. One of the men spent his free time sketching, so there is a good record of the soldiers in winter garb and locals enjoying winter diversions, such as tobogganing down the riverbank.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Sketches by Lieutenant George E. Finlay, 6<sup>th</sup> Regiment, 1846-1848, Manitoba Pageant, Autumn 1966, Vol 12, 1

Crofton reported in letters home that he hosted meals for the locals, but the most noteworthy event was the soiree at Fort Garry on New Year's Day. At the prescribed hour, people started to arrive on foot, on horseback, and in horse-drawn carriages. James Bird was likely among them with his third wife, the English schoolteacher, Mary Lowman. Irish store-keeper Andrew McDermot was no doubt there with his half-breed wife, Sarah McNab. Ann and her husband may have been invited, too, because George had standing as one of the original Selkirk settlers. The walls were decorated with crossed swords and draped flags. Officers in red coats with polished brass buttons danced with local women in their finest dresses. Fiddlers played jigs and reels.<sup>154</sup> Crofton was polite and gracious, but later in a letter to his wife he would admit that he was 'much disgusted with the vulgar and ill-bred folk here'.<sup>155</sup>

Crofton left Red River in June 1847, but the regiment stayed for another year until their ships could make the trip to York Factory. The young officer went back to Britain because there were no battle honours to be gained and he was anxious to see his new wife. His connection with the colony wasn't over, however. He gained a position in the War Office where they were dealing with a petition of grievances from the Red River Metis. When consulted, he described the HBC as 'mild and protective', which contributed to the decision to let the matter drop.

## February 1849 Red River Settlement, Rupert's Land

There were two types of courts in the Red River Settlement – petty courts presided over by magistrates and the General Quarterly Court of Assiniboia, which held trials by jury. There was only one lawyer in the colony, Adam Thom, who acted as a judge but also recorded local laws. Both Thom and George Simpson, who had appointed him, held similar views that the locals believed put the Metis and French at a disadvantage.

Ann's brother, Charles Heywood, served on a jury in February 1849 that heard a case involving men of the Royal Chelsea Pensioners, a group of retired soldiers who had replaced the Sixth Regiment of Foot. The case of assault was, unfortunately, all too typical of the behaviour of the new militia group who soon gained a reputation as drinkers and brawlers. In this case<sup>156</sup>, one man was accused of calling the other 'vile names', threatening to break into his house, striking him, knocking him down, and kicking him. He was found guilty of assault but fined only one shilling because the plaintiff was a 'notorious ne'er-do-well' who was often before the courts.

Jurors were men selected from across the parishes for their good reputations. They helped to build confidence in the legal system, which at the highest levels was filled with HBC appointees, whereas the jurymen were people's neighbours. Those appointed became influential and helped to govern the colony through their decisions, although the real power was with the Council of Assiniboia.<sup>157</sup> Ann's brother served on seven juries between 1847-1857; her husband, George Adams, served on four between 1848-1853; and her son, George Adams Jr, on two in 1871<sup>158</sup>.

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<sup>154</sup> Margaret Arnett MacLeod, *Red River New Year*, *The Beaver*, December 1953

<sup>155</sup> William R. Morrison, *The Sixth Regiment of Foot at Lower Fort Garry*, Parks Canada

<sup>156</sup> Dale Gibson, *Law, Life, and Government at Red River*, vol. 2, p. 105, *William Smith versus G. Welsh and Turner*

<sup>157</sup> Jillian McConkey, *Native Judgments: John Bunn and the General Quarterly Court in Red River*, (Thesis, U. of Manitoba, 2009)

<sup>158</sup> Dale Gibson, *Law, Life, and Government at Red River*, vol 2

Court records provide evidence of connections among people, as shown in plaintiff-defendant-witness clusters, but also in the twelve jurors at each trial. The jury for the February 1849 assault trial, for example, included two more of my ancestors, Joseph Bird and Alexander Work.<sup>159</sup>

Trials were held in the courthouse, situated outside of Fort Garry. When Ann's brother sat as juror that day, he would have walked down the central corridor between the jail and the courtroom, which were in the same building. There was a small area of public seating when one first entered, and at the far end of the room was the bench, a table and chairs on a raised platform, with two steps at each end. The four men on the bench that day were the president of the court, the recorder, a magistrate, and the sheriff<sup>160</sup>. The court clerk's desk was covered with green cloth and upon it was his record book, pens and inkwell, tumblers and a jug of cold water.<sup>161</sup> There were tables for the two opposing sides of the case and a witness box. The jury sat on two rows of wooden benches on the left side of the judge. The room in February would have been stifling hot from the pot-bellied iron stove because ventilation was notoriously poor. Everything in the courtroom was on a very small scale, so people were packed together; one can only imagine the pungent odour of men who rarely bathed.

Most trials were initiated by everyday people and involved livestock or debt. Some were in the public interest, such as those involving liquor or theft. Murder trials were rare, eight in twenty years from 1844-1864, of which only one resulted in a death sentence. The accused, a Saulteaux named Capenesseweet (or He that has changed into a bird), admitted shooting a Sioux man<sup>162</sup> who was among a small group visiting the colony. The two were in a crowd of about 150 people walking from the river to Fort Garry, so there were many witnesses. Capenesseweet raised a gun over his left arm and fired, killing the Sioux man and a bystander<sup>163</sup> with one bullet. The other man was Saulteaux. Had the same thing happened outside of the colony, there would have been no trial because the Court didn't exert authority there. This, however, had been just outside the walls of the fort, putting settlers at risk. The trial on September 4, 1845, found the man guilty<sup>164</sup>. A scaffold was built and days later before a crowd of one thousand people, Capenesseweet was hanged. According to one observer, 'a voice was scarcely heard, and all parties left the ground in silence',<sup>165</sup> although there was general agreement that the action was necessary. It was the first and only execution in Red River.

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<sup>159</sup> Joseph Bird, married to Elizabeth Thomas, was a son of James Bird Sr and his first Cree wife. Alexander Work, from the Orkney Islands, was married to Isabella (Cree). Bird and Work are on my maternal great-grandmother's line, whereas James Isham and his descendants are on my maternal great-grandfather's line.

<sup>160</sup> Major Caldwell, president; Adam Thom, recorder; John Bunn, magistrate; Cuthbert Grant, sheriff

<sup>161</sup> Dale Gibson, *Law, Life, and Government at Red River*, vol. 1, p. 106 (quoting James Hargrave)

<sup>162</sup> Tatungaokaysnay (the Buffalo that lags behind), Sioux

<sup>163</sup> Apetwaywetung (the Ceaseless voice), Saulteaux

<sup>164</sup> Dale Gibson, *Law, Life, and Government at Red River*, vol. 2, p. 17. Case #6 – The Public Interest vs Capenesseweet

<sup>165</sup> Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, p. 332

One trial that drew everyone's attention was the 'HBC versus Pierre Guilleaum Sayer'. The Company, which continued to lose furs to the American fort at , decided to make an example of four free traders. The criminal trial was scheduled for Sunday, May 17, possibly because it was Ascension Day and the Metis would be in church. Early that morning, men began arriving at St. Boniface Church from across the parishes. Leaving their guns outside, they attended an early mass and then gathered as Louis Riel Senior spoke to the crowd<sup>166</sup>. Meanwhile, across the river at Fort Garry, sheriff Alexander Ross, who would later write about it, watched as the crowd arrived and surrounded the courthouse. 'The banks of the river, above and below the fort, were literally crowded with armed men', Ross said, 'moving to and fro' in wild agitation, having all the marks of a seditious meeting, or rather a revolutionary movement'.<sup>167</sup> When the trial was finally held, after hours of negotiations with the dissident leaders to produce the defendant, it was concluded quickly when Sayer confessed. The jury delivered a guilty verdict but recommended he receive no punishment. At this point, the HBC dropped the cases against three other men who were to be tried that day on the same charge. Sayer and the others 'left the court together, greeted with loud huzzas'. One of the jurymen, Ross observed, 'gave three hearty cheers' and started a chant that was repeated by the crowd, 'Le commerce est libre'. (Trade is free!) They 'kept shouting repeatedly, in the midst of yelling, whooping, and firing', as they dispersed. Reflecting on the Sayer trial years later, George Simpson would conclude that it proved the HBC could not enforce the law and 'gave the people a consciousness of their strength'.<sup>168</sup>

The Sayer trial had not really changed anything, except uniting the French Metis and English half-breeds in their resolve to be governed fairly. George Simpson arrived in the colony soon afterwards and was immediately presented with a petition summarizing their grievances. He called a special meeting of the Council of Assiniboia at which judge Thom agreed to speak both French and English in court as needed. Over time, the laws were translated, and French-speaking jurors were recruited so that cases could be conducted in either language. Eventually, members representing the French-speaking citizens were added to the Council of Assiniboia. Although the HBC wouldn't abandon its charter right to control the fur trade, they reduced duties on American goods to the same rate as those from York Factory. They licensed private traders and bought their furs. Judge Thom was not terminated, as the petitioners demanded, but Simpson persuaded him not to act as Recorder. (Two years later, Thom's appointment was revoked, but he stayed for another three years as company clerk.)

A long-term effect of the free trade struggle was an increase in trade between the colony and St. Paul, Minnesota. In the 1850s, there were hundreds of Red River carts on the trails each season, but by the 1860s traffic had increased to thousands. New imports, such as lamps, stoves, and building supplies that were too heavy to bring on the York Factory route, meant that people lived more comfortably than ever.

Perhaps the most important result was that the mixed-blood population had learned how to stand up for their rights, which increasingly they understood to be inherited from their indigenous mothers. A year after the trial, a petition circulated among the English settlers

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<sup>166</sup> He read a letter from Father Bellecourt, who had written the French petition years earlier. Bellecourt was now in Pembina, having been banished from the colony by George Simpson.

<sup>167</sup> Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, p. 373

<sup>168</sup> Dale Gibson, *Law, Life, and Government at Red River*, vol. 1, p. 118

demanding that the governor, who was also president of the Council, be removed.<sup>169</sup> He was a weak, incompetent man, who had arrived as the commander of the militia from Chelsea. (He stepped down temporarily but remained in the colony for another five years.) The petition was another show of force and a sign of things to come.

It's likely that both Ann's husband, George Adams, and her brother, Charles Heywood, signed the English petition to remove the governor because they were both active jurors at the time, involved in community affairs. Five hundred signed, which would have accounted for most of the English farmers – of the 5400 people in the colony, more than half were children, 60% were French-speaking, and many were women. It's safe to assume, therefore, that Ann's uncle, Thomas Isham, and her brother-in-law, James Knight Junior, also signed the petition (and may have attended the Sayer trial). Ann would have been involved in other ways, though, privy to meetings of the men in her kitchen, perhaps; or aware of the clutches of men chatting outside the church on a Sunday; or through the gossip of women over a cup of tea. Her two oldest sons, George Junior and Charles, were twelve and eleven at the time, old enough to watch the adults assert their autonomy and beginning to understand the argument about their indigenous rights.

## September 1850 High Bluff, Rupert's Land

By the time Ann's ninth child, Elizabeth Barbara, was born in 1850, the family was living on a new farm along the Assiniboine River west of the colony. It was an area of rich soil amid leafy ash, elm, oak and poplar that would later become the parish of High Bluff. The river originated about six hundred miles northwest, flowing rapidly along an ancient glacial delta, picking up silt, until it reached the plains where it slowed and created meandering curves, depositing rich sediment at each turn. Between Ann's farm and the Red River Settlement, about sixty miles east, the river was so crooked that one observer said that, if one drew a straight line twelve miles long, the river would cut it eighteen times.<sup>170</sup> It was about 180 feet wide at High Bluff, somewhat smaller than the Red River which it joined at the Forks. Each farm fronted onto the river and extended back in a narrow strip, creating the same types of lots as in the colony. The river provided fish, such as walleye, yellow perch, and northern pike; there were berries and grapes along its tree-covered shore. Yellow-headed blackbirds sang in the reeds and cliff swallows nested on the banks.

The vast flat prairie to the west of High Bluff was the beginning of buffalo country. The 'unrelieved immensity' of it, an observer noted, changed throughout the day as the sun tracked across the uninterrupted sky. 'It must be seen at sunrise', he wrote, 'when the boundless plain, suddenly flashes with rose-coloured light, as the first rays of the sun sparkle in the dew on the long rich grass, gently stirred by the unfailing morning breeze.'<sup>171</sup> At noon, refraction creates mirages that swell distant hills into mountains and clumps of aspens into wide forests. At sunset, a huge ball of fire dips below the horizon, flooding the waving green grass with red light. By moonlight, each blade of grass is tipped with silver and the sky is filled with stars that 'disappear suddenly as they touch the earth'.

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<sup>169</sup> Major William Caldwell

<sup>170</sup> Henry Youle Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River*, p. 140

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134-135

A few miles west of High Bluff, a handful of other farmers were getting established where indigenous people had portaged their canoes between the river and Lake Manitoba (now Portage la Prairie). The HBC had a small fort, consisting of three houses – officer's quarters, men's house, and trading shop – and most days there were Cree or Assiniboia tipis pitched outside the fence. The year after Ann's family moved to High Bluff, the Reverend William Cockran built an Anglican mission at Portage la Prairie and several families from his parish in the colony started farms near it. In 1852, the Red and Assiniboine rivers flooded, and several other families decided to move to higher ground in the western parishes.<sup>172</sup>

Ann and George likely moved out of Red River so their children would be able to live side-by-side on their own river lots. Later census and land records show that most of her children eventually had farms near the original homestead and just a few families dominated the area – Adams, Cook, Inkster, Paquin (Pocha).<sup>173</sup>

There is no sketch or photo of Ann's house at High Bluff, but it likely started small and was added to over the years. There are two heritage homes in present-day Winnipeg that were built about the same time in a style called the 'Red River frame house'.<sup>174</sup> Oak logs about seven-inches square were secured into a frame using wooden pegs, and each was filled horizontally with smaller logs. The spaces between were usually filled, or chinked, with clay and straw, although one of the heritage homes used buffalo hair and fur. The exterior was whitewashed with a limestone and water plaster. Many of the new homes in Red River were two-storey, with verandahs or front porches. One eye-witness described a large farm at this time in the parish of Headingly as a 'commodious farmhouse, with its well-arranged, substantial outhouses'.<sup>175</sup>

Inside Ann's house, there was likely a large kitchen with a table and chairs for ten people. The front door opened onto a large living room and the bedrooms were at the back or upstairs. Perhaps she had an attached summer kitchen that had originally been a small log house from their first years on the new farm. The rooms were painted in fashionable colours, such as beige, brown, and green. The furniture would have been hand-made, but some may have been purchased from the traders who still went to St. Paul, Minnesota, each year. There was a large wood stove in the kitchen and a small pot-bellied one in the parlour.

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<sup>172</sup> The 1852 flood was two feet lower than the one in 1826, but there was more destruction because the settlement had grown.

<sup>173</sup> Census 1870. There were fewer than ten extended families in High Bluff – (1) ADAMS – Ann, her 3 sons, 2 daughters and their families; (2) PAQUIN/POCHA – Joseph, his 5 sons and one daughter and their families; (3) INKSTER – Robert and 3 sisters, all married to men from the Isle of Lewis; (4) COOK – four cousins; (5) HOURIE – 2 brothers; and apparently unrelated, Joseph McKay and Thomas Sinclair and their families. All, except five men, were Anglo half-breeds.

<sup>174</sup> Ross House and the Seven Oaks Museum

<sup>175</sup> Joseph James Hargrave, *Red River*, (Montreal: John Lovell, 1871), p. 203

Ann's eldest child, Ann Nancy, married John Foulds in 1855. The bride and groom were both descended from family lines that had originated in the early years of the fur trade – Isham, Fidler, Hallett, Heywood, Foulds.<sup>176</sup> Four years later, George Junior married Mary Cook, continuing the intricate pattern of intermarriage among the original HBC families.<sup>177</sup> By the end of the decade, Ann had four grandchildren (cousins to my great-grandfather).<sup>178</sup>

By 1859, there were enough people in High Bluff to establish a school and a church. In the early years, schooling was offered by the Anglican and Catholic churches, but access was limited. In 1837, for example, about 250 children were in school but 1900 were not. By 1859 when George Adams signed the contract of High Bluff's first teacher, there were seventeen schools across the parishes.<sup>179</sup> The school would have been one room in a small log building, with one teacher and students of all ages. The one-room schoolhouse was typical in small prairie towns as late as the mid-1950s. Ann's sixth child, James, who was fifteen at the time, must have attended school because we find his signature on later records. His four younger siblings would also have gone to school, but the older children must have been taught at home by their father.<sup>180</sup> Ann's children likely completed only two or three years of schooling. (My grandfather had six years of school in the 1920s, which was common at the time.) In Ann's family, literacy had skipped two generations. Her grandfather, Charles Isham, had gone to school in London but she and her mother had no access to schools. She, like most in the colony, had signed her marriage record with a mark (an X). Unlike many women, however, Ann had married a man with a basic education, which would have been a great advantage for the family.

In 1860, Ann had her last baby, Maria, when she was forty-five and George was sixty-three. Her two oldest children were married and the other six ranged in age from twenty-two to four. During her child-bearing years, she had twelve pregnancies, but three died in infancy. The family was well-established in the parish. Ann's adult children lived nearby on their own farms and she had friends, such as the widow, Nancy Ann Spence, and Marie Lapointe, wife of Joseph Paquin.<sup>181</sup> The church was full on Sundays; the children were in school. The family was removed from the political tensions and ethnic divisions of the Red River Settlement. But this comfortable life wouldn't last.

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<sup>176</sup> Verna Redhead et al, *The Descendants of George Adams and Ann Heywood*, p. 7. Ann Nancy ADAMS married John FOULDS on January 4, 1855, at St. John's Anglican Church in the Red River Settlement. The groom was the son of John Foulds Senior and Mary FIDLER. The groom's uncle, James HALLETT, was a witness. The senior Foulds had known Ann's father, Joseph Heywood, who had travelled with him from England to York Fort when he was a recruit. Mary Fidler was the daughter of Peter Fidler, the HBC surveyor who had helped Ann's grandfather, Charles Isham, build Carlton House (Assiniboine River). James Hallett was the son of Henry Hallett who worked with Charles Isham at the Swan River forts in the 1790s. Hallett's wife, Sarah, (the groom's aunt) was also a daughter of Peter Fidler.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52. George ADAMS Junior married Mary COOK on December 22, 1859, at St. Paul's Anglican Church in the Red River Settlement. The bride was the daughter of Samuel Cook and Suzette SHORT. Samuel Cook was the son of William Hemmings Cook and Nancy Mary COCKING.

<sup>178</sup> By 1860, Ann had four grandchildren – Robert, William, and John Henry, sons of Ann Nancy Adams and John Foulds; and James Wilson, son of George Adams Junior and Mary Cook.

<sup>179</sup> John Norquay was the first teacher in High Bluff.

<sup>180</sup> George Adams signed the marriage register, whereas Ann Heywood made her mark.

<sup>181</sup> This can be inferred from the 1870 census, the locations of their farms, and the spouses of Ann's children.



## May 1857 High Bluff, Rupert's Land

By the late 1850s, the colony was connected to the world in new ways. There had been regular postal service by way of Pembina, but by 1858 the colony had its own post office for Canadian mail. The HBC was using the same overland trails as the free traders to bring in supplies through St. Paul, and by 1860 they had regular steamboats operating on the Red River along the same route. Two Canadians brought a printing press and began publishing a newspaper, the *Nor'-Wester*. Slowly people started to arrive from the east by way of the USA and by the end of the decade there were 6500 people in the colony, almost a thousand more than when Ann's family had left for High Bluff.<sup>182</sup>

The HBC continued to enforce its monopoly of the fur trade and to govern the vast Northwest, but it was under increasing pressure to relinquish the Royal Charter. The British parliament convened an inquiry in 1857 to consider whether to renew the HBC's exclusive license over territories west of the Rocky Mountains. The Committee considered all aspects of the business, however, because of increasing pressure from several quarters to terminate the HBC's monopoly. The lawyer who had represented the settlers' 1848 petition to the Colonial Office, brought forth their original complaints and added a few of his own, along with a new petition calling for Canada to annex the settlement. Store-owner McDermott's nephew, who had taken a petition to Washington years earlier seeking American citizenship for residents of Red River, testified that the HBC controlled the Council of Assiniboia and searched traders' mail and cargo, as well as a litany of other complaints. A representative of the colony of the United Provinces of Canada<sup>183</sup> argued that the HBC claimed more territory than the Charter originally granted, the border between Canada and Rupert's Land was ill-defined, and Canada should be able to annex HBC lands suitable for settlement. George Simpson testified that farming in HBC lands was 'very uncertain' and, therefore, not 'well adapted to settlement'.<sup>184</sup>

The press in Britain, Canada, and the Red River Settlement followed the hearings, spread over several months, and provided the public with a rare glimpse into HBC business practices and governance in North America. One British newspaper published a speech by Chief Peguis (recorded by his son) in which he explained that the treaty signed with Lord Selkirk decades earlier was 'preliminary to a final bargain', but settlers 'now claim all the land between the Assiniboine and Lake Winnipeg – a quantity of land nearly double of what was first asked from us'. Before the Northwest is settled by whites, he demanded, there must be 'a fair and mutually advantageous treaty'.<sup>185</sup>

In the end, the parliamentary inquiry confirmed the HBC's original charter claim to Rupert's Land which meant that Canada would have to compensate the Company if it annexed the Northwest. It did not, however, renew the HBC's license further west, so when it expired two years later, the new Colony of British Columbia and Vancouver Island was formed. The HBC's London Committee welcomed the change because they could continue to dominate the fur trade but no longer had the expense and trouble of governing the area.

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<sup>182</sup> 1856 Red River Census - 6522 people in 922 houses

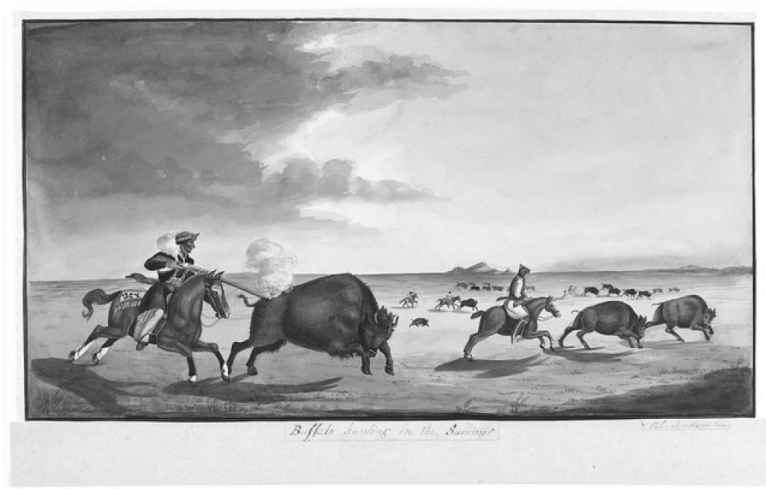
<sup>183</sup> Canada at this time was a colony, consisting of Canada East (Quebec) and Canada West (Ontario), as defined in the 1840 Act of Union.

<sup>184</sup> Dale Gibson, *Law, Life, and Government at Red River*, p. 137-139

<sup>185</sup> Donna Sutherland, *Peguis – A Noble Friend*, p. 139

Both Britain and the colony of Canada wanted to know more about the potential of the Northwest for farming and future colonization, so two expeditions were dispatched. John Palliser<sup>186</sup> and four other scientists described a triangular semi-arid region of shortgrass prairie that would not be suitable for agriculture (from southwest Manitoba to southeast Alberta, including Swift Current, Sask., and Medicine Hat and Lethbridge, Alberta). Henry Youle Hind<sup>187</sup> reported to Canadian officials that there was a fertile belt where crops could flourish, arcing from south of the Red River Settlement, northwest to the forks of the Saskatchewan River (Prince Albert, Sask.), and along the North Saskatchewan River to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Simon Dawson, an engineer in Hind's entourage, surveyed a route of 530 miles from Lake Superior to the colony, which could bring settlers to the prairies when the time was right. By 1860, both levels of government had determined that colonization was possible. Only one thing stood in the way – the HBC.

In 1860, George Simpson died at his home in Lachine after forty years as Governor of Rupert's Land. His time in power had been one of relative peace, beginning with the merger of the rival fur companies.<sup>188</sup> The vast empire of the HBC now covered 4.5 million square miles with one hundred fifty posts and three thousand traders and servants doing business with about one hundred thousand indigenous hunters. Within a decade, however, Rupert's Land would no longer exist. Three years after his death, HBC shareholders sold out to a financial society that began immediately to negotiate with the Colonial Office to relinquish their responsibility to govern the Northwest. (There was a precedent to consider. The East India Company surrendered their governmental powers in 1858.) It would be another decade before this happened, however, and along the way there would be conflict and rebellion.



*Buffalo Hunt (Peter Rindisbacher 1822)*

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<sup>186</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Palliser, John. Palliser was in the Northwest 1857-1860.

<sup>187</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography – Hind. Also, Hind's Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 (1860)

<sup>188</sup> Lahey, Blaze of Glory, p. 213

## May 1863 High Bluff, Rupert's Land

Ann's sons spent weeks each summer on the buffalo hunt, along with their friends and many other Metis and half-breed families. Living in the western parishes, they were close to the herds, although some years they had to go as far as Fort Ellice (Qu'Appelle, Sask.) to find them.

George William Sanderson, a future son-in-law, described one hunt in his memoir.<sup>189</sup>

'My chum Jimmy Adams and I rode out together', Sanderson wrote, referring to Ann's nineteen-year-old son, James. 'When we got near the buffalo, I looked at Jimmy and he had his mouth open, laughing at the old bulls running.'

'The guns were all muzzle loaders and the rider carried a powder horn on his right side, a shot or bullet pouch on the other, and the gun caps in his waist coat pocket. The bullets for immediate use he held in his mouth', Sanderson explained. Seeing Jimmy, he too had to laugh and he 'dropped the bullets out of my mouth, consequently neither of us fired a shot.'

'The Pocha's, father and seven sons, were at the hunt', Sanderson continued, 'and it was a pleasure to see how they could handle their guns and horses.'

This clutch of friends at a buffalo hunt is a snapshot of alliances that would endure throughout their lives, even during the later rebellions of 1870 and 1885. They had all moved to the area as young children. James Adams was six when the family moved to High Bluff. William (Billy) Pocha's family arrived about the same time. George Sanderson's family had been among the first twelve who established farms at nearby Portage la Prairie as part of Reverend Cockran's mission<sup>190</sup>. All were part-Cree. In 1863, the friends were young unmarried men and, judging from later photographs of James and his brothers, tall and broad-shouldered with thick dark hair. They look confident and wise in the photographs, but on this day in May, on this day at the hunt, they were likely brash and bold as young men are sometimes when enjoying each others' company.

Perhaps James (Jimmy) wore his Metis sash on the hunt, the one that is now in my collection (he's my great-great-grandfather). Each hand-woven sash was about twelve feet long and narrow, with fringes on each end. His was red with multi-coloured threads creating an arrow or lightning effect, originally mass-produced in L'Assumption, Quebec. The voyageurs wrapped the sash around the waist several times, leaving the fringes hanging almost to the knees. They tucked things into the folds, like a set of pockets, and used it as a tumpline to carry heavy packages during portages. It was also a rope, a washcloth and towel, and a tourniquet. When Jimmy and his friends wore sashes, they had become a symbol of their heritage but were also useful on a buffalo hunt, where they might be left on a dead buffalo to mark the kill; used as a saddle blanket; or to wrap a broken bone. Nowadays, the Metis sash is a cultural icon for those of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry.

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<sup>189</sup> George William Sanderson, *Through Memory's Windows* (1934-36), p. 2-3. Sanderson is likely describing a hunt in about 1870-75 when the seven Pocha sons he mentions were all old enough to go on the hunt.

<sup>190</sup> George William Sanderson was the great-grandson of James Sanderson Senior (1757-1819), an HBC servant from Scotland, and his Cree wife. His grandfather, James Thomas Sanderson (or Sandison) built Carlton House on the Saskatchewan River (Fort Carlton) along with James Bird. His father, James Sanderson Junior, drowned on the way to Red River. His mother, Elizabeth Anderson, remarried to William Sutherland. George was about seven when the family, including his mother's father and sons, moved to Portage la Prairie in 1853 as part of Reverend Cockran's new mission.

Jimmy and his friends were taking significant risks hunting buffalo that year. The Cree had traditionally allowed the Metis to share in the unfathomable bounty of the hunt in their territory west of Portage la Prairie, but by the 1860s, the number of bison were decreasing. Hunters had to go further west each year to find the remaining herds. (This pattern is evident in the locations of HBC posts which moved deeper into Cree territory over the years.) Herds still came close to High Bluff, but less frequently and less predictably, so the Cree tried to curtail the Metis hunts. Sometimes, knowing that the Metis were gathering to begin a hunt, the Cree would set the prairie grasses on fire to force the herd away. One observer described such a scene from the western parishes. "The distant prairies are in a blaze," he wrote, "thirty, fifty, or seventy miles away, when the fire reaches clumps of aspen, and the forked tips of the flames flash and quiver in the horizon, and the reflected lights from rolling clouds of smoke above tell of the havoc which is raging below."<sup>191</sup>

Metis buffalo hunters also had to fear the Dakota (Sioux), who moved freely over the border in their traditional territory south of the Assiniboine River. Sightings were becoming more common as American settlers flooded into the Midwest, sometimes claiming homesteads on Dakota reserve lands. A local man told the leader of the Hind expedition that he had seen "several bands of Sioux Indians on the trail of the buffalo hunters, who were coming in from the Great Prairies after their summer hunt." The Dakota had stolen ten horses from the tail-end of the caravan the previous night, about half a day's journey from Portage la Prairie.<sup>192</sup>

Beginning in May 1863, Dakota lodges dotted the landscape at Poplar Point, High Bluff, and Portage la Prairie. The first group of eighty people, led by Little Crow, had arrived at Fort Garry seeking refuge from American troops who had hanged thirty-eight. (President Abraham Lincoln had commuted the sentences of the other 264 who were also sentenced to death.) Starving because treaty agents had not delivered promised supplies, the Dakota attacked several settler communities and killed many people. News had arrived in Red River three weeks later where everyone was now in a state of 'nervous expectation', knowing that the enemies of the Saulteaux were fleeing over the border. Over the years, several small groups of Dakotas had come to the fort to trade and, in each case, the HBC men had tried to avoid conflict with Peguis' band. This time was different, however. The Dakotas were looking for a place to live.

In November and December, more arrived in the colony until there were six hundred camped six miles west of the fort. The leaders had silver medals with a likeness of King George III and promises passed down from their grandfathers who had fought alongside the British in the War of 1812 that the English would help when needed. By August the following year, there were three thousand people in 350 lodges at Fort Garry, all 'destitute and starving' because their lodges and supplies had been destroyed by the Americans.<sup>193</sup> From then on, the Dakotas lived near the western parishes along the Assiniboine River, where they hunted, fished, trapped, and worked for farmers at harvest time. No doubt Ann's family encountered Dakota people many times.

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<sup>191</sup> Henry Youle Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Exploring Expedition of 1857*, vol. 1, p. 135

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143-144

<sup>193</sup> Roy W. Meyer, *The Canadian Sioux-Refugees from Minnesota*, *Minnesota History*, Spring 1968, p. 13-28

## October 1865 High Bluff, Rupert's Land

George Adams died in 1865, fifty years after arriving in the Red River colony as a seventeen-year-old Selkirk settler. George's funeral was a modest family gathering at St. Margaret's Church in High Bluff with interment in the graveyard beside the church. There had been two high-profile funerals recently, funerals attended by many people and talked about by everyone. The first was Chief Peguis who died in September 1864. Following a service at his home, an entourage of dignitaries and family took his body across the river to St. Peter's Church for burial.<sup>194</sup> When Reverend William Cockran died in October 1865, his casket was carried by men from Portage la Prairie, through the parishes along the Assiniboine and Red Rivers, to St. Andrew's. People gathered all along the route, even in the Catholic parishes.<sup>195</sup>

Ann was now called 'the widow Adams' as was customary in the settlement. She had five children still at home ranging in age from five to twenty-one. Her four married children lived nearby on their own High Bluff river lots. Nine young children called her 'grandma'.<sup>196</sup>

Ann's future son-in-law, George Sanderson, described her diligence in protecting her daughters. 'The old ladies were very stingy of their daughters,' he wrote in his memoir, 'and a fellow had a hard time to get a chance to talk to one alone.' Ann Adams, he recalled, 'had some beautiful daughters, but of course the old lady was ever watchful. I watched my chance though and one evening while Mrs. Adams was milking, I got near enough to the girl to whisper a few words to her; she gave assent and after that I braved the old lady and got her consent.'<sup>197</sup>

The lineage of Anglo half-breed families in Red River was almost biblical in that most people could trace their ancestry to a few early HBC officers, such as James Bird, who had nineteen children by three wives; William Hemmings Cook, with twelve; Peter Fidler, with fourteen; and Thomas Thomas, with eight. By the time their grandchildren and great-grandchildren began marrying into Ann's family, the ancestral trees had become a tangled web in which everyone was related to everyone in the English Protestant parishes. (The same was likely true for the French Catholic parishes, but their early origins were less well documented.)

Ann's daughter-in-law, Elizabeth Bruce, was an example of this endogamy. She was the great-granddaughter of both Bird and Thomas on her mother's side. Her father was the grandson of an HBC boatman from Orkney. I have a photograph of Elizabeth, sitting beside Ann's son, James, on their fiftieth wedding anniversary. (They are my great-great-grandparents.) She was petite, slim, and very dark, with large deep-set eyes and prominent cheekbones. Those who knew her, including my grandfather, said that she went from house to house during times of illness with her 'herbs' as a 'nurse-doctor', spreading the latest news as

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<sup>194</sup> Donna G. Sutherland, *Peguis: A Noble Friend*, p. 144, excerpt from journal of Rev. Abraham Cowley

<sup>195</sup> Raymond M. Beaumont, "The Rev. William Cockran: The Man and the Image", in *Manitoba History*, Manitoba Historical Society, Number 33, Spring 1997.

<sup>196</sup> Perhaps George had lived long enough to see two more of his children married. Charles married Ann Nancy Norquay, sister to both John Norquay, who would become the Premier of Manitoba, and Thomas, who would be member-of-parliament for Manitoba in the Canadian government. Joseph married Ann Elizabeth Bird, granddaughter of the two 'principal settlers' James Bird Sr and Thomas Thomas.

<sup>197</sup> Sanderson memoir, p. 13

she went.<sup>198</sup> This confident, some said ‘opinionated’, young woman and Ann’s son would have twelve children over the next twenty-three years.<sup>199</sup>

Robert (Robbie) was the only boy in Ann’s household after James married. Even when he married in 1868, Robbie would continue to be ‘the man of the house’ for his mother and three younger sisters. Ann Pocha, her new daughter-in-law, had lived just a few miles down river at the eastern end of High Bluff with her parents and siblings. It’s possible that they had lived there a decade or more before Ann and George Adams arrived. (Most years, they evaded the census taker.) Her father, Joseph<sup>200</sup>, was the son of an independent trader from the St. Lawrence valley who had travelled west with the Lagimodière party (Louis Riel’s grandparents) as far as the Edmonton area. He was the only surviving child when Sarcee warriors killed everyone in the traders’ camp while his father was away, including his mother. Ann Pocha’s mother, Marie Lapointe, was also the child of a trader from Montreal and his Cree wife. The Pocha family spoke French and Cree, identifying (on future census records) as ‘French half-breeds’.<sup>201</sup> Although their first son was baptized at St. Boniface Catholic Church, they eventually became protestant, possibly as the protestant parishes of High Bluff and Poplar Point on either side of their river lot, enveloped them. The Pocha’s married into Anglo half-breed families – Adams, Anderson, Spence, Tait – and became closely aligned with the Adams clan.

## February 1868 High Bluff, Rupert’s Land

When a thunderstorm approaches on the prairies, there is ample warning to take cover if one recognizes the signs. Towering cumulus clouds skirt the horizon, their bottoms black and heavy. There is a moment when sunlight fades to gray and all is still, before the backdoor slams shut. The silver undersides of the leaves on the willow shrubs face upward to announce that the monster has arrived. Raindrops the size of pebbles pummel the earth, creating puffs of dry soil and expressing the sweet smell of ozone. Hail stings the skin and rattles carts and roof tops. Minutes later, the rain stops, and the storm moves on creating a swath of flattened grain in its wake.

In retrospect, Ann should have realized that her sons were headed for trouble, but being unfamiliar with politics and activism, she may not have seen the signs. It began with a meeting at a store in Portage la Prairie, although that would have been the culmination of months of chatter and gossip about their grievances. High Bluff and Portage la Prairie were beyond the fifty-mile radius of the authority of the Council of Assiniboia, and as such, had no local government or enforceable laws. The new shopkeeper, originally from Edinburgh, had been editor of the newspaper when he first arrived in the colony two years earlier and was a vocal advocate of increased settlement.<sup>202</sup> Ann’s sons, James and Robert, likely attended the meeting and the ones that followed, along with their friends, George Sanderson and William Pocha. (All were involved in later events.) Eventually, the group established a local government and wrote

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<sup>198</sup> Redhead, Verna et al. *The Descendants of George Adams and Ann Heywood*, p. 135

<sup>199</sup> Two died as infants.

<sup>200</sup> The family name was Paquin dit Pocha. Over time, they became known as Pocha but, as late as the 1870 Manitoba census, they were listed as Paquin.

<sup>201</sup> Census 1901, Florence May Pocha

<sup>202</sup> The shopkeeper, Thomas Spence, was no relation to the Spence family in High Bluff who were Ann’s friends.

to the government in Canada and the British foreign secretary asking for official recognition as the province of Manitoba. Then, they imposed a tax on imports from the Red River settlement to raise revenue for a government building and a jail. The provisional government collapsed when they were accused of misappropriating funds for liquor, at about the same time as they were informed by the British Colonial Office that they had no authority to set up a government in HBC territory. The ambitious scheme had failed, but the next month the Council of Assiniboia extended its jurisdiction to include Portage la Prairie.<sup>203</sup>

When the Canadian Parliament met for the first time in 1867, they passed a resolution to annex Rupert's Land. Negotiations began with the HBC, but it would be two years before the deal was completed. No one from the HBC or the Canadian government talked to the people of Red River, so local rumours spread, and as questions went unanswered, different factions formed and tension increased. Some people, encouraged by the local newspaper, demanded annexation to Canada. Some, mostly French Métis, expressed concerns about their property rights. Some, especially Americans who had moved north in recent years, promoted a takeover by the USA.

By October 1868, before negotiations with the HBC were complete, a crew arrived from Canada to begin construction on a road from Red River to Lake of the Woods that would eventually bring a flood of settlers from the east. The next summer, surveyors joined the road crew to map out future homesteads. The flash point was when William McDougall arrived south of the border in Pembina, intent on coming to Red River to take over as lieutenant-governor of a new Canadian territory. To this point, no one in authority had informed or consulted the HBC governor or local citizens of Red River. The move was premature, some people said, and the colony must be defended from an invading force by another country.

When trouble started, word spread quickly from person to person, family to family, parish to parish. In mid-October 1869, the surveyors got too close to farms in the St. Norbert parish, south of Fort Garry along the Red River. One of the farmers stopped the survey team and neighbours mobilized to protect themselves, patrolling the area day and night and setting up a checkpoint on the main trail south. Eventually, there were armed patrols all the way from Fort Garry to the border. On November 2, an armed group of 120 Métis seized Fort Garry, and at the same time, another sixty men forced the new lieutenant-governor back across the USA border to Pembina. Meanwhile, the Métis had set up their own offices at Fort Garry, raided the HBC stores for provisions, and distributed guns and ammunition left years ago by the militia. Their leaders were John Bruce and Louis Riel. Bruce, a carpenter who assisted other Métis in presenting cases before the courts of Assiniboia, was elected president and Riel, who had recently returned to Red River after studying and working in Montreal for ten years, was secretary. The HBC governor and the Council of Assiniboia were no longer in control.

The Métis posted flyers in the parish churches inviting residents to nominate representatives for a committee called the 'Convention of 24'. The twelve French and twelve English delegates met three times in the following weeks but could not agree on whether to let the new Canadian lieutenant-governor come to the colony. When Riel seized the massive land register and the HBC account books mid-way through the series of meetings, the English became skeptical of

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<sup>203</sup> Dale Gibson, *Law, Life, and Government at Red River*, p. 211

his true intent and alarmed for their safety. Most parishes held public meetings without definitive actions being taken.<sup>204</sup> After three days of meetings, the French and English delegates could not agree on whether to establish a provisional government. They had, however, adopted a list of rights that summarized their positions on essential conditions that Canada would have to meet if annexation was to proceed.

Opposing forces were gathering. Two surveyors under orders from the lieutenant-governor, who was still waiting in Pembina, began recruiting and training a militia to challenge the Métis for control. By December, the Métis had jailed forty-five men in Fort Garry for conspiring against them, including John Christian Schultz, an outspoken advocate of annexation to Canada. Meanwhile, Major Boulton, one of the surveyors, continued to train men at Lower Fort Garry.

The day after Schultz and his men were jailed, the French Métis proclaimed a provisional government in a raucous ceremony within Fort Garry. By Christmas, Bruce stepped down as president due to ill health and Louis Riel took over.

In December, McDougall left for Ottawa after six weeks of waiting in Pembina to enter Rupert's Land as its new lieutenant-governor. The Canadian government was already planning to send an envoy to Red River to negotiate, a move that its critics would say should have happened months earlier.

Christmas 1869 was quiet in Red River. Ann and her family likely attended church at St. Margaret's in High Bluff, exchanged gifts and ate a lavish meal together, giving thanks that everyone was safe and healthy. The Métis attended midnight Mass at St. Boniface Cathedral and a few private parties were held with fiddle music and step dancing. Meanwhile, the prisoners at Fort Garry were crowded into rooms on the second floor, and Riel's militia continued to guard the fort. Weathered flyers were still posted at most churches, announcing the List of Rights that had brought a degree of consensus to the settlement.

The envoys from Canada arrived in early January<sup>205</sup> and, two weeks later, held a public meeting at Fort Garry on two consecutive minus 40° days. Crowds of one thousand or more attended each day, no doubt bundled up in furs and buffalo robes. Ann's son, George Adams (Jr.) likely attended on behalf of High Bluff and brought back word that their concerns would be taken to Ottawa. Riel accepted the envoys' proposal to send a delegation to negotiate with Canada and to establish a Representative Assembly of fourteen French and fourteen English members to govern until a new provincial government could be established. Ann's son, George, took the lead in selecting a delegate from High Bluff.

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<sup>204</sup> J. M. Bumsted, *Reporting the Resistance: Alexander Begg and Joseph Hargrave on the Red River Resistance*. (Winnipeg: U. of Manitoba Press, 2003), p. 111. J. J. Hargrave, November 1869. The people of St. Andrew's declared themselves "willing on the call of the authorities to take to arms."

<sup>205</sup> The envoys were Donald A. Smith, a Scot working for the HBC in the east; Father Jean-Baptiste Thibault, a missionary in the Northwest; and Colonel Charles de Salaberry, who had served in Hind's scientific expedition to the Red River in 1857.





*Envoys address crowd*

*The Canadian government sent three men to negotiate with Riel's occupying force. They addressed crowds of one thousand or more at Fort Garry on two consecutive days in minus 40° weather in January 1870. Riel accepted their proposal to send a delegation to Ottawa to discuss terms of the annexation. In the meantime, a Representative Assembly of twenty-eight men would govern the colony. (image - HBCA)*

Five men in Ann's circle joined the forces mobilizing at Portage la Prairie to fight against Riel and his Metis militia. Major Boulton, who had been training volunteers at St. Andrew's, moved nearby and was joined by other leaders who had been part of Schultz's pro-Canadian gang. Ann's son, Robbie, joined the so-called 'Portage party' in January 1870, along with his father-in-law, Joseph Pocha, and his friends, Johnny and Billy Pocha, and George Sanderson. For women like Ann, who must wait in the sidelines, it was distressing to watch this drama unfold, with Robbie and his friends on one side, while her other sons – George Jr., Joseph, and James – remained ambivalent like most of the other English half-breeds.

By mid-February, the group saw action. Intent on freeing the prisoners from Fort Garry, the Portage la Prairie group marched to Red River and joined forces with men already at St. Andrew's. At one point, someone seized Norbert Parisien, a labourer who worked in the fort, and accused him of being Riel's spy. Parisien escaped with a gun and, as he was getting away, shot a young farmer. A group of men recaptured him, beating him severely in the process.<sup>206</sup> Two of the Paquin (Pocha) brothers apparently struck the first blow, hitting him on the head with a hatchet. The next day, his guard shot him when he tried to escape again.

As the Portage la Prairie gang waited for battle, word came that the prisoners in Fort Garry had been released. That should have been the end of the action but, as the men headed home, they came too close to the fort and Riel's men arrested them.

There were two eye-witness accounts of the arrests. One man watched from the village as the group approached slowly through deep snow drifts. Fifty men on horses 'darted' out of Fort Garry, he noted, 'cheered by their comrades on the walls as they left'. 'The Portage men now came to a halt; the French and English seemed to mix up in one body. A considerable halt then occurred, when the whole party moved off in the direction of the Fort.'<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> N. E. Allen Ronaghan, "The Archibald Administration in Manitoba – 1870-1872". (Thesis, U. of Manitoba, 1987), p. 206.

<sup>207</sup> J.M. Bumsted, Reporting the Resistance, p. 249. A letter from Alexander Begg, dated 18 February 1870, was published in the Toronto Globe.

George Sanderson and his brother were in the melee. Years later in his memoir, he recalled the event from the perspective of the Portage gang. "When we came near the Fort", he said, "a man on horseback shot out of the gate like an arrow, then another and so on until ten or twelve came out. One rode towards us and stopped to speak. He held up a white handkerchief in his right hand. We stopped [but none of our leaders] came forward so old Mr. Pocha walked up to the rider and said in French, "Good day. What do you want?"

The man answered, speaking French also, "Our leader, Louis Riel and his Officers, wish you all to come into the Fort, and have dinner with them." Well, that was very acceptable; we couldn't dream of refusing such an invitation as we had not had too much to eat since we left home. We were all ushered into the Fort where we had to stay more than a month."<sup>208</sup>

Word spread quickly throughout the settlement that the Portage men had been imprisoned in Fort Garry. In a show of force, Riel held a court marshal that imposed a death sentence on the group's leader, Major Boulton. The people of High Bluff, and all of those in the English parishes, were likely startled by this development. Several prominent people appealed for clemency and, eventually, Riel spared his life when the emissary from Ottawa promised to encourage Canadian legislators to support the provisional government.

Robbie Adams, George Sanderson, Johnny and Billy Pocha and their father, Joseph, ('old Mr. Pocha') would each spend 30-33 days in jail.<sup>209</sup>

On March 1, George Adams (Jr.) signed a form that proclaimed John Norquay the representative from High Bluff on the new provisional government<sup>210</sup>. Three days later, Riel ordered the execution of Thomas Scott, who had been found guilty of insubordination. He was a 'difficult prisoner' who insulted his guards and 'did not disguise his contempt for the Metis'. When he was sentenced to death following a court marshal, Riel decided not to intervene; a firing squad executed the prisoner the next day. Those opposing Riel hardened their stance.

About two weeks later, Ann's son, Robbie, and the other men from High Bluff were released from jail. No one talked of the ordeal from then on, it seems, and over time their descendants lost the story altogether.

Why had Robbie and his brothers-in-law joined the Portage party to oppose Riel? Perhaps their reasons were like others, both English and French, who refused to follow Riel because they disapproved of his methods.<sup>211</sup> Riel had occupied Fort Garry, taken HBC supplies to feed his men, and stolen cash from the HBC strongbox to pay them. He had imprisoned his opponents and made decisions without consulting the elders of the French Métis or the leaders of the English parishes who were elected to the conventions and the provisional government. The Portage la Prairie group was no doubt influenced by pro-Canada activists, such as Schultz, even though they didn't share his anti-French and anti-Catholic views. Perhaps, the men from High Bluff were willing to fight because they wanted to join Canada and their families were traditionally staunch supporters of the HBC. Or, it may have been because they were young and naive as Sanderson stated in his memoir years later: 'I have found out since that there are

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<sup>208</sup> George William Sanderson, *Through Memory's Windows*, p. 13-14

<sup>209</sup> Alexander Begg, *The Creation of Manitoba*, (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, & Co., 1871), p. 289-290. The name of the Paquin family was also Pocha. Begg lists the three as Paquin, but I have used Pocha for consistency.

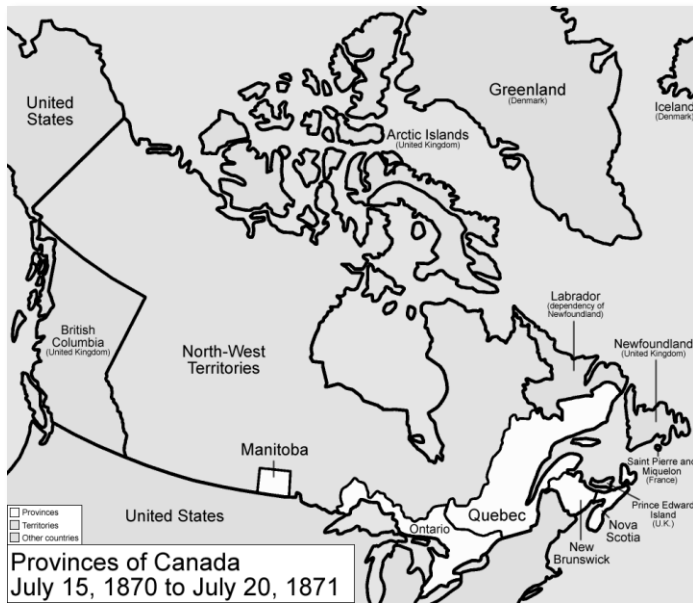
<sup>210</sup> HBCA MG3.A1.13

<sup>211</sup> Gerhard Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 127

always busy bodies making more trouble than is necessary on these occasions’, he said, ‘but I was young then, so of course a bunch of us went.’<sup>212</sup>

The Manitoba Act was passed in the Canadian parliament on May 12, 1870, creating the province of Manitoba. It was initially so small, basically consisting of the Red River Settlement south to the American border, that it was compared to a postage stamp. The rest of old Rupert’s Land, from the western borders of Quebec and Ontario to the Rocky Mountains, became the Northwest Territories.

The final scene in the saga of the Red River Resistance had not yet concluded, however. Canada sent a militia force ahead of the new lieutenant-governor, and many of the young soldiers were intent on revenge for Scott’s execution. Hearing rumours that they planned to lynch him, Riel fled from Fort Garry and crossed over the USA border. By September, Adams G. Archibald had arrived and been sworn in. Some of the Canadians, still determined to punish someone for Scott’s death, attacked and killed local men in five separate incidents in the following weeks. Eventually, the new government established law and order and life returned to normal. If the Adams and Pocha families thought they had seen the last of Riel, however, they were mistaken.



#### Manitoba 1870

*The Manitoba Act of May 12, 1870, created the new Canadian province of Manitoba, and Rupert’s Land ceased to exist. The small province some compared to a postage stamp included the Red River Settlement south to the American border. The rest of the former HBC territory of Rupert’s Land became the North-West Territories. (map – Wikimedia)*

<sup>212</sup> George William Sanderson, *Through Memory’s Windows* (1934-36), p. 13

## October 1876 High Bluff, Manitoba

The Cree had been in contact with French and English traders for two hundred years by this time and had adapted to changing circumstances and opportunities many times. In the early years, some had lived seasonally near the forts on Hudson Bay, the so-called Home Indians, while others who lived inland became trading middlemen. When the HBC and NWC built forts along the rivers, they moved from the woodlands to the plains where they learned to hunt buffalo. They exchanged their canoes for horses, their bark-covered lodges for leather tipis, their bows-and-arrows for guns. And now, a change was occurring that required them to adapt once more. The buffalo were disappearing, and Euro-Canadian settlement was imminent.

The indigenous leaders were generally anxious to negotiate treaties like the ones they had heard of in American territory, so that some of their land would be off-limits to homesteaders. They also needed help to adapt to life without the buffalo, which in most cases meant they must learn to farm. The government of John A. Macdonald wasn't inclined to move quickly, however, and planned to negotiate treaties as an area was being opened to settlers.

The first treaty of eleven was signed on August 3, 1871, at Lower Fort Garry between Canada and the Saulteaux (Ojibway) and Swampy Cree of south-east and south-central Manitoba. Three weeks later, Treaty 2 was signed with the Saulteaux for a large tract of land to the west and north of the new province of Manitoba. By 1874, the Cree in present-day central Saskatchewan and Alberta were getting restless and the Canadian government sent the Northwest Mounted Police (NWMP), a new military-police force, to maintain order. The following July, the Cree stopped a government crew from making a geological survey of their territory near the elbow of the North Saskatchewan River (north-east of Saskatoon) and threatened to turn back the men building telegraph lines. The Canadian government acquiesced and sent word that they were ready to negotiate.

Treaty 6 was signed by Cree, Assiniboine, and Ojibwa chiefs on August 23, 1876, at Fort Carlton (and other chiefs signed in September at Fort Pitt). The differing cultures and worldviews of the Canadians and the indigenous chiefs resulted in misunderstanding right from the start. Negotiations began with the pipe ceremony (described more than one hundred years earlier by Ann's great-grandfather, James Isham), which the Canadians understood to be a friendship ritual, but the native leaders believed was a sacred commitment involving the Great Spirit in negotiations. When the terms of the treaty were finally recorded a few days later, the Canadians believed they had created a contract that itemized everything that had been agreed to, whereas the indigenous leaders understood that the speeches and oral promises were also inherent in the pact. The most fundamental misunderstanding involved land. The Cree and others had no concept of individual land ownership, so they had agreed to share the land and resources with newcomers. The Canadians, on the other hand, thought they had completely surrendered the land to the federal government.<sup>213</sup> Federal politicians had assumed as they began making these treaties that the indigenous people would eventually die out or become assimilated into Euro-Canadian culture. That didn't happen.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Treaty Six, Canadian Encyclopedia

<sup>214</sup> John Leonard Taylor, Treaty Research Report – Treaty Six (1876), Northern Affairs Canada, 1985

The Dakota (Sioux), who had wintered in the High Bluff and Portage la Prairie area since 1863, were not included in the treaty process because government officials considered them to be 'American Indians'. By 1869, there were five hundred just a few miles from Ann's farm. They hadn't been involved in the troubles leading up to Riel's provisional government, and they maintained a peaceful relationship with their traditional enemies, the Saulteaux. Eventually in 1873, Canada granted them reserve land – not a reservation, not a treaty with annuity payments – but land on which to settle. (In 1886, the Dakotas of Portage la Prairie purchased twenty-six acres on the Assiniboine River within the town limits, locally called the Old Sioux Village.)

To manage relations between the federal government and individual reservations, a new branch was added to the Department of the Interior in 1873, that of 'Indian Affairs'. Besides a commissioner and his staff in Ottawa, there were administrators in the field, right down to the 'Indian agent' and 'farm instructor' for each reservation. While the treaties formed the constitutional and moral foundation of the relationship, the Indian Act of 1876 defined the rules through legislation.<sup>215</sup> Whereas the native leaders had entered treaties expecting to govern themselves, the Indian Act assumed that they needed guardians until, in the government's own words, the people reached 'a level of sophistication that allowed them to fully integrate into Canadian society'.<sup>216</sup> The Indian Act, developed without the involvement or consent of the people it governed, allowed the department to manage every aspect of treaty promises (such as, annuity payments); life on reserves (such as, rations and farm implements); and education (such as, farming instruction and, by 1894, residential schools).<sup>217</sup> The first task of the new branch was to identify its clients (or wards), so the Indian Act also defined who was an Indian.<sup>218</sup>

At about the same time as treaties were negotiated, the Manitoba Half-Breed Commission visited the Red River parishes so that people could apply for land and money that had been promised in the Manitoba Act (and subsequent Orders in Council). It had taken six years to reach this point, beginning with a census in 1870 to enumerate those eligible for land grants and a survey to determine what land was already occupied. There were about twelve thousand people in Assiniboia in 1870 of which ten thousand were 'half-breeds'.<sup>219</sup> Of these, eight thousand were children. People living in the new province could keep the farms they lived on, and 1.4 million acres would be distributed to the 'children of half-breed residents'. It took several

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<sup>215</sup> Anthony J. Hall, *Treaties with Indigenous Peoples in Canada*, Canadian Encyclopedia (2011)

<sup>216</sup> Government of Canada, *History of Treaty-Making in Canada*

<sup>217</sup> John F. Leslie, *The Indian Act: An Historical Perspective*, Canadian Parliamentary Review, Summer 2002, p. 23-28

<sup>218</sup> Bob Joseph, *21 Things you may not know about the Indian Act*, p. 11. A status Indian in the 1876 Indian Act was any male person of Indian blood reported to belong to a particular band, any child of such a person, any woman who is or was lawfully married to such a person.

<sup>219</sup> The Manitoba census of 1870 counted French Metis (5696) and English half-breeds (4082). "The term 'half-breed' was used almost exclusively by the federal government throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries when referring to these people (in western Canada who trace their roots to a shared indigenous and European ancestry). The term completely pervades departmental memoranda, reports, registers, federal statutes, orders-in-council, and official publications. Indeed, it is possible for researchers to use the federal record of this period without ever encountering the term 'Metis'." (Library and Archives Canada/Metis Scrip Records/Use of Term Half Breed)

years to reserve the land for this purpose, however, since each parish<sup>220</sup> could express its preference for the location of tracts of land.

The Commission arrived in High Bluff and neighbouring Poplar Point on October 2, 1876. We know that Ann, her adult children, and her neighbours turned out when the Commission set up stacks of government forms that day. The claims they completed are numbered consecutively, showing that James and his wife, Elizabeth (Bruce), signed, followed by Ann, her son, Robbie and his wife, Ann (Pocha). George Jr. applied for scrip (a certificate redeemable for land) for himself and land for his minor children, as well as the land title for lot 24, which was the original farm established by Ann and her husband. Further down the line, were Ann's friends, Joseph and Marie Pocha.<sup>221</sup>

With two strokes of a pen, Ann made an 'X' beside her name and signed away her rights as an indigenous person in the Northwest. The \$160 she received was enough to buy 160 acres of Dominion land. By attending the Commission that day, Ann and the other adults in High Bluff accepted the ethnic label 'half-breed'. Until that time, it's doubtful that they thought much about their mixed heritage because it was the norm in the settlement. It had become important to identify as indigenous to get farmland, but at the same time they were relinquishing their rights. The stated purpose of the government was to 'extinguish' their land claims and any future claims of their descendants.

| <b>Founding families of High Bluff</b>       | <b>Lot #</b> |
|--|--------------|
| George Adams Jr. & Mary (Cook)               | 24           |
| Charles Adams & Ann (Norquay)                | 51           |
| James Adams & Elizabeth (Bruce)              | 52           |
| Robert Adams & Ann (Pocha)                   | 53           |
| George Sanderson & Elizabeth Barbara (Adams) | 54           |
| Joseph Adams & Ann (Bird)                    | 58           |
| John Foulds & Nancy (Adams)                  | 59           |
| William Pocha & Maria (Anderson)             | 60           |
| Joseph Pocha Jr. & Matilda (Hodgson)         | 61           |
| James Tait & Margaret (Pocha)                | 62           |
| Thomas Pocha & Rosalie (Flammand)            | 63           |
| John Pocha & Harriet (Spence)                | 64           |
| Charles Pocha & Mary Ann (Tait)              | 66           |
| Joseph Pocha Sr. & Marie LaPointe            | 68           |

<sup>220</sup> Electoral districts were defined using existing parishes. High Bluff was defined in the Manitoba Act as the area from George Adams' lot #24 on the west to Andrew Spence's lot 71 on the east. (Statutes of Manitoba 1871, Electoral Division Act, p. 47)

<sup>221</sup> Ann Adams' half-breed scrip: #10927, \$160. Claim #2050 Poplar Point and High Bluff. Affidavit #24090001 1078330. Library and Archives Canada (RG15-D-11-8-f vol. 1390)

DOMINION OF CANADA.  
 PROVINCE OF MANITOBA.  
 County of *Marquette*

I, *Ann Adams (Keywood)*  
 of the Parish of *Agit Bluff* in the said  
 County and Province, *widow of J. Adams Senior*  
 make oath and say as follows:

1. I am a Half-breed head of a family resident in *Said* Parish  
 on the fifteenth day of July, A.D. 1870.  
 2. *Maria Adams, now personally present, is the Child*  
 of myself, this deponent, a Half-breed.  
 and of *John Adams, English, and was born in*  
~~The following persons respectively children~~ *Agit Bluff* Parish *9<sup>th</sup> December A.D. 1861*  
 were respectively born in *Agit Bluff* Parish *9<sup>th</sup> December A.D. 1861*  
 and will attain the age of eighteen  
 years at or about the following date: *9<sup>th</sup> December 1879*

| CHILD NAMED. | BORN. | WILL ATTAIN 18. |
|--------------|-------|-----------------|
|              |       |                 |

of whom *is* now here present.

3. My said children ~~respectively~~ claim to be entitled to participate in the allotment and distribution of the 1,400,000 acres of land set apart for Half-breed children pursuant to the statutes in that behalf, and I believe ~~them~~ to be so entitled.

4. ~~None~~ *John* of my said children was the head of a family on the fifteenth day of July, A.D. 1870, nor has ~~any of them~~ or any one on behalf of ~~any of them~~ claimed or received as an Indian any annuity moneys from the Dominion Government, or made any claim of land or scrip other than the above in this or any other Parish.

*Ann Adams*  
*Mary*

Sworn before me at the Parish of *Agit Bluff*  
 in the County of *Marquette* on the  
*19<sup>th</sup>* day of *August* A.D. 1875, having  
 been first read over and explained in the *English*  
 language to said deponent who seemed perfectly to  
 understand the same, and *made his mark*  
 in my presence.

*J. M. Graham*  
 Commissioner.

Metis Scrip

Ann applied for Maria's Half-breed Scrip in the same way that all mixed-blood parents applied on behalf of their minor children. (Source: Library and Archives Canada R190-43-X-E)

When the HBC sold Rupert's Land to Canada for £300,000, the company also got one-twentieth of whatever land was surveyed for homesteads. As land sales became part of the business and fur sales declined, retail sales increased in response to settlement. In 1881, the HBC opened its first Winnipeg sales shop at the corner of York and Main, using stone from old Fort Garry's walls and ramparts for the foundation.<sup>222</sup> The following year, they sold the fort and eventually the rest of the buildings were demolished, except for one gate which nowadays is a National Historic Site.

## June 1882 Prince Albert, Northwest Territories

Between 1870 and 1882, thousands of people left Manitoba and moved west as far as the Rocky Mountains. Ann's family was part of the exodus, except for her eldest son, George Jr. who remained in High Bluff. Three of her children – Joseph, James, and Maria - joined a group of families heading west by Red River cart on the Carlton Trail to the Prince Albert area in 1880<sup>223</sup>. Among them were many of the old HBC families - Anderson, Tate, Pocha, Inkster, McNabb, Adams, Kennedy, Bruce, Bird and Halcro. Another group, with Ann, Robert, and Mary, left two years later.<sup>224</sup>

Why did Ann's family leave High Bluff? A flood of new settlers from Ontario changed the nature of the community so that, as one old-timer put it, every second person on the street was a stranger. Also, in recent years most men elected to the Legislature were from Ontario. Transportation improvements meant farmers could sell their crops to external markets, but their river lots were too small for this new style of farming. Also, their children were rapidly reaching adulthood and, with real estate prices rising, it was a good time to sell.

I can see Ann, now sixty-seven, preparing to leave High Bluff. She takes off her white apron, folds it carefully and puts it into her satchel. She looks around the kitchen for the last time – the place of numerous family meals; the room the women gathered in while the men talked politics in the big room; the spot where visiting friends drank tea; the space where the children played while a blizzard raged outside; the room with her best memories and her worst. This is Robbie's kitchen, his wife's kitchen, and Ann's kitchen since George died seventeen years ago. She sweeps the floor for the last time, one more place she'll leave behind, along with her brother and sister, and the graves of her husband, her mother and four children<sup>225</sup>. She steps outside and closes the door.

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<sup>222</sup> John Selwood, "Manitoba History: A Note on the Destruction of Upper Fort Garry" (1982)

<sup>223</sup> Ann's children left High Bluff for the Prince Albert area between 1878-1882. The first to leave was George Sanderson and his second wife, Euphemia Whitford. (Elizabeth Barbara Adams died after the birth of her second son.) Ann's daughter, Nancy, and John Foulds left the following year. In 1880, three more left. Joseph Adams and his second wife, Christina Franks, travelled with six children. His first wife, Ann E. Bird, had died in 1870. James Adams and his wife, Elizabeth Bruce, had two girls and four boys between the ages of two and twelve, and she was pregnant with a son who would be born about three months after they arrived. Ann's youngest daughter, Maria, travelled with her husband, George Charles Spence, and an infant daughter.

<sup>224</sup> Ann's son, Charles, and his family also moved to Prince Albert in 1882 but arrived separately. They had been living the Pas, where he was 'clerk in charge' of the HBC post. (HBCA Biographical Sheets – ADAMS, Charles)

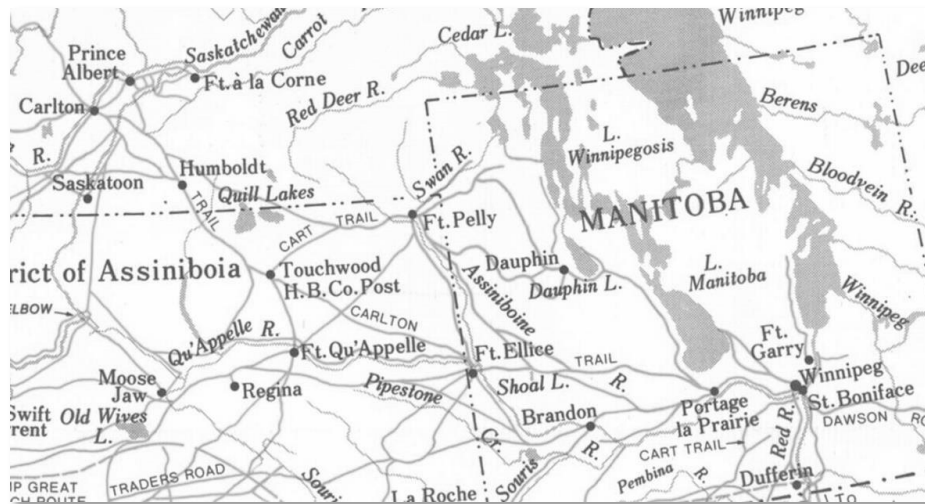
<sup>225</sup> Three died young. Her daughter, Elizabeth Barbara, died in childbirth, leaving two young sons and her husband, George William Sanderson.





*Brigade of Red River Carts*

*The Adams family left High Bluff in two groups, one in 1880 and another in 1882. Ann's siblings, Charles Heywood and Elizabeth Knight, did not leave the colony, remaining instead in St. Paul's parish. (image: Red River Cart Train by Wm G. R. Hind 1833-1889. Toronto Public Library)*



*Carlton Trail*

*Ann's family joined the Carlton Trail at High Bluff, just east of Portage la Prairie. They passed through Fort Ellice, the Touchwood HBC Post, and present-day Humboldt. They crossed the South Saskatchewan River at Gabriel's Crossing (Batoche), passed Fort Carlton and finally arrived at their destination south of Prince Albert. The Carlton Trail also connected Fort Carlton to Fort Edmonton, so end to end it was about 900 miles long. The trail was the only overland route until the 1890s when the railroad arrived. (map: Western Canada's Established Trails, [railways.library.ualberta.ca/Maps-2-1-2](http://railways.library.ualberta.ca/Maps-2-1-2))*

The Carlton Trail was no mere scuff mark on the prairie marking the annual movements of bison and Indigenous people, an indentation suggesting a route for the newcomer to follow. In the decade following Riel's provisional government, it had been scarred with deep ruts from the Red River carts as whole families moved west. Their tracks stretched out as far as the horizon, disappeared over the curve of the Earth, and continued to the next way station, the next fort, the next river, the next dream.

Ann's remaining family pulled onto the trail at High Bluff in 1882, joining other screeching carts that had set off from Fort Garry days earlier. There were eleven people in her party – Ann, Robbie with his wife and five children, and Mary with her husband and infant daughter. Her other children were already established on homesteads at their destination. The carts were loaded with their possessions and pulled by oxen, so the pace was slow. In a typical day, they would travel about ten miles and on Sundays stop to rest. The entire trip of five hundred miles took about two months.

By snowfall, seven of Ann's children were settled in sight of Red Deer Hill on land the locals called 'the Ridge', or 'the Pocha settlement' after the first families to establish homesteads.<sup>226</sup> Ann's family lived side-by-side in a configuration like the river lots of High Bluff. James Adams, for example, lived next door to Joseph Pocha and Marie Lapointe, and very near Billy Pocha, who had spent time in jail during Riel's rebellion. Within a radius of a few miles, there were fifteen homesteads with close family ties to Ann Heywood Adams.<sup>227</sup>

The first houses were simple log cabins. Ann's son, Robbie, was one of the first to own a sawing outfit and soon he had a two-story frame house that was large enough to host local dances.<sup>228</sup> Later, he also cut the lumber for an Anglican church, St. Paul's Lindsay, and the first schoolhouse just half a mile from James Adams' house. (The church was still standing when I was a young woman and, when it was dismantled in 1987, several people took mementos, such as the two boards with hand-made square nails that are now in my collection.<sup>229</sup>)

The Adams and Pocha homesteads were situated on fertile land between the two branches of the Saskatchewan River, with prairie on the south and parkland forest on the north. The North Saskatchewan River flowed through Edmonton and Battleford; the South Saskatchewan passed through present-day Saskatoon, and the two met twenty-five miles east of Prince Albert. Small rural communities in the area were reminiscent of the original parishes of Red River. The

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<sup>226</sup> Nine of Ann's children survived to adulthood. George Adams Jr. and his family stayed in High Bluff on the original homestead and acquired four homesteads across the river from Portage la Prairie, know as the Kelvin District. (p.52, Redhead et al) He died in 1916 and is buried in St. Margaret's cemetery, High Bluff. Elizabeth Barbara Adams died in 1873 and her husband, George William Sanderson, remarried to Euphemia Whitford. They moved to Prince Albert in 1881. (p. 307 Redhead et al)

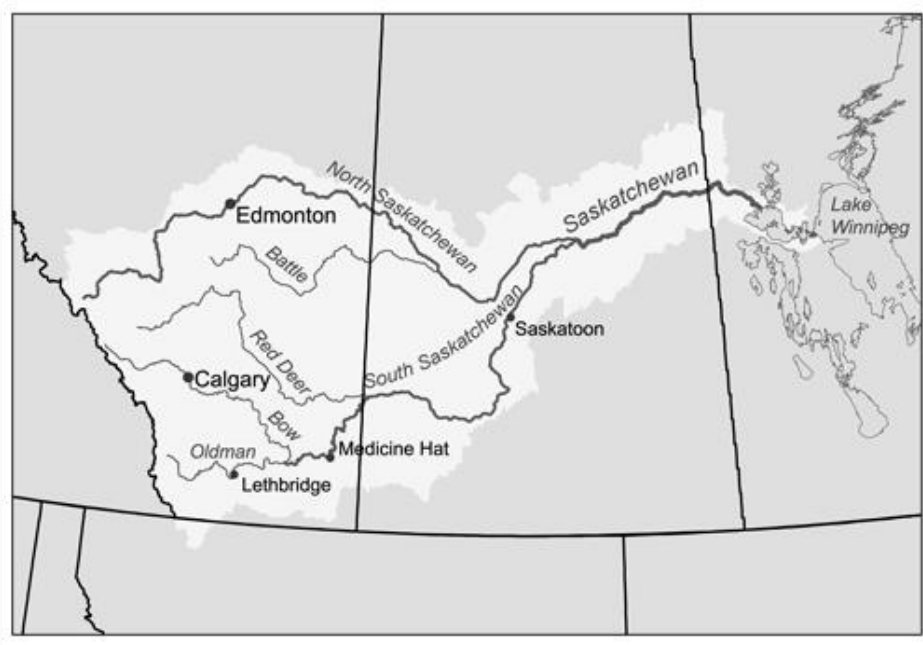
<sup>227</sup> McPhillips Business Directory 1888; Redhead et al: All the homesteads were west of the 2d meridian. James Adams & Elizabeth Bruce (ne-6-47-27); Robert Adams & Ann Pocha (se-18-47-27); Joseph Adams & Christina Franks (sw-32-46-27); John Foulds & Nancy Adams (nw-30-46-27); Charles Cook & Mary Adams (se-10-47-27); George Spence & Maria Adams (ne-32-46-27); Charles Adams & Ann Norquay (sw-32-46-26)

<sup>228</sup> Redhead et al, p.277

<sup>229</sup> My father helped to demolish the church. He took two boards, which my sister ultimately gave to me.

English half-breeds lived in Prince Albert, Red Deer Hill, Halcro and the Ridge<sup>230</sup>; the French Metis lived in Duck Lake, Batoche, St. Laurent, and St. Louis.

Prince Albert, about twenty-eight miles to the north of Ann's family, was the largest in the area, with a population of about eight hundred. Although it was not yet incorporated as a town, it was a commercial centre that included lumber and flour production. By late 1882 when Ann arrived in the area, Prince Albert had seven general stores, two hardware stores, three banks, two watchmakers, six lawyers, a dentist, a druggist, and four churches. There was a real estate office, too, opened in response to booming land sales, and local leaders were confident a railroad branch line would be built soon. By comparison, Regina, Saskatoon, and Battleford were small and undeveloped.<sup>231</sup>

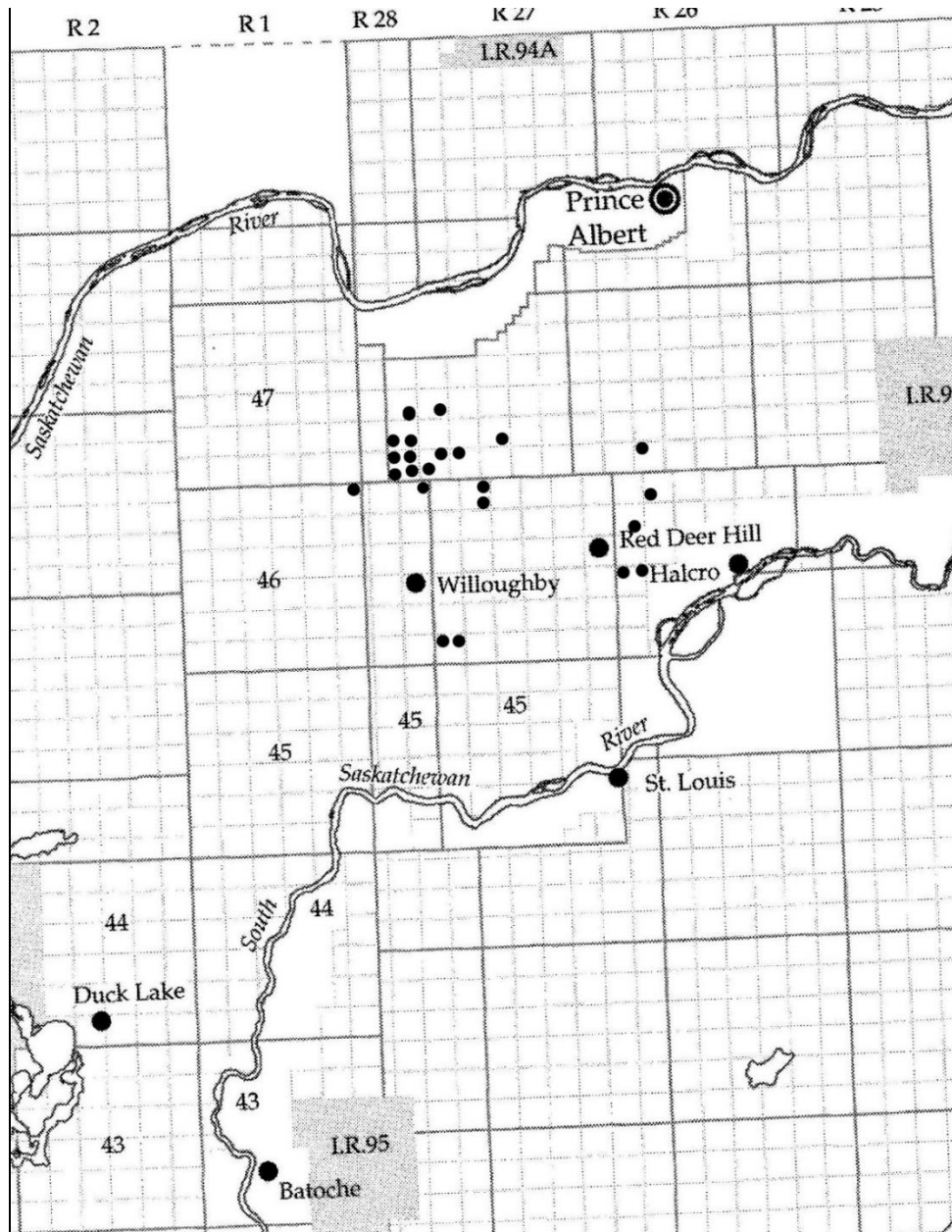


*Saskatchewan River*

*The Saskatchewan River originates in the Rocky Mountains of Alberta. The North and South branches join east of Prince Albert, SK, and continue east to Cedar Lake, MB, passing through it and terminating at Lake Winnipeg. The Adams family settled in the triangle formed by the convergence of the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers. (Map of Saskatchewan River Watershed. Karl Musser, Wikimedia Commons)*

<sup>230</sup> The Ridge is an area north of present-day Macdowall, Saskatchewan, where most of the Adams and Pocha homesteads were located. St. Paul's Lindsay Anglican Church sat at the top of a sandy hill. The area had several local names, including 'Lindsay' and the 'Pocha Settlement'.

<sup>231</sup> Gary W. D. Abrams, *Prince Albert: The First Century 1866-1966* (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1966), p. 35



Map: 1888 Homesteads of Adams and Pocha/Paquin Families

Each small dot represents one homestead. The largest cluster is in township 47, range 27, west of the 2d meridian. The English lived in Prince Albert, Red Deer Hill, Halcro and Lindsay (Willoughby on this map). There were four French Métis settlements along the South Saskatchewan River: Duck Lake, Batoche, St. Laurent, St. Louis. The four Indian reserves shown are; Wahpeton Dakota (north of Prince Albert); Muskoday (SE of Prince Albert); One Arrow (near Batoche); and Beardy's and Okemasis (near Duck Lake). (Source: Douaud, *The Western Métis*, adapted from LAC National Map Collection, V1/502)

## October 1883 Prince Albert, Northwest Territories

The Northwest Rebellion of 1885 was another episode in Ann's life that has been reshaped and mythologized, re-told and embellished, until today some events are obscure. It was essentially a cry for help from three different groups of people living in what is now north-central Saskatchewan to their national government – the Cree, the French Metis, and the English farmers (both Euro-Canadians and half-breeds). From Ottawa's perspective, the natives were out of control and the west was a single, coordinated enemy. The three groups each took a different path, however, with diverse goals, strategies, and outcomes. Ann's view of the rebellion was from the Ridge, from the perspective of the English half-breed farmers.

Three men in Ann's kinship circle got involved from the outset. Her son, Charles Adams, had left High Bluff soon after marrying Ann Norquay to work as 'clerk in charge' of minor HBC posts in the north.<sup>232</sup> They had been away from the Red River Settlement during the trouble of 1870, but Charles' wife had important connections that would have kept them informed – her brother, John Norquay, was premier of Manitoba 1878-1887. They moved to the Prince Albert area in 1882 and lived about a mile from Andrew Spence, father-in-law to Ann's youngest, Maria. Spence, who had also lived in High Bluff, was the grandson of an HBC labourer from Orkney.<sup>233</sup> His wife, Letitia Ann Cook, was the granddaughter of former chief factor, William Hemmings Cook. The third man was William (Billy) Pocha, who lived on a homestead beside his parents, Joseph ('old man Pocha') and Marie Lapointe<sup>234</sup>. He had been a member of the 'Portage party' during the 1870 rebellion and jailed at Fort Garry along with his brothers and Ann's son, Robert. All three men were in their early forties and farmed on the Ridge near Red Deer Hill.

For Ann, the Northwest Rebellion began when her son, Charles Adams, became a founding member of the Lorne Agricultural and Industrial Society, which organized a fair to showcase agricultural products and local handicrafts.<sup>235</sup> There was no local government at the time, so before long the farmers began using the society to create informal policies and to discuss their fears about the economy, especially low grain prices and the delay in getting a railroad. By October 1883, they had formed a separate Farmer's Union to address their grievances with the federal government. Andrew Spence was president and Charles Adams was an officer.<sup>236</sup>

What they needed, the group decided, was a charismatic spokesman. Spence suggested Louis Riel, who was in exile in Montana. They dispatched a delegation that included James Isbister, the first English half-breed farmer in the area, and Gabriel Dumont, a French Metis who operated a ferry at Batoche. Dumont's neighbours were angry that federal surveyors were mapping out their land in square sections, rather than following the plan of long, narrow river lots they had already established.

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<sup>232</sup> HBC Biographic Sheets - Charles Adams. He worked at The Pas, Rapid River, Lac St. Anne, and Victoria (Edmonton) between 1866-1882.

<sup>233</sup> Andrew Spence was the son of George Spence and Nancy Ward. His grandfather, James Spence, married Margaret Nestichio Batt, half-breed daughter of Isaac Batt.

<sup>234</sup> Billy Pocha's youngest brother, George, who was about twenty-seven at the time, is my great-great-grandfather.

<sup>235</sup> Later, it would be called the Prince Albert Exhibition Society.

<sup>236</sup> P. J. Code, *Les Autres Metis*, (Thesis: U. of Saskatchewan, 2008), p. 85



*Anglican Church on the Ridge*

*St. Paul's Lindsay Church was located on nw-4-47-27-w2. A family story tells of Elizabeth (Bruce), Ann's daughter-in-law, carrying four spruce seedlings in the pockets of her white apron to the new church where she planted them inside the fence along the road. (photo: B. Krack, 1979)*



*Lindsay Schoolhouse*

*The Lindsay schoolhouse was a log building with a thatched roof. The first teacher, Rev. R. W. Atwater, opened the school in 1886 with 65 pupils. It had been the site of several meetings during the early days of the 1885 rebellion. (photo: B. Krack, 1979)*

Riel arrived in July 1884 and in the following weeks held several meetings to gain support for a petition from the Farmer's Union to Ottawa. He also met with Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear), a prominent Cree chief from the Fort Pitt area (north of present-day Lloydminster). Big Bear made two speeches to local chiefs, one at Duck Lake and one at Fort Carlton, describing a better way to establish reservations. He wanted one large reserve on the North Saskatchewan River, with one representative to speak on their behalf in Ottawa. Big Bear and Riel met, but neither got support for his cause.

By December, Andrew Spence sent the petition to Ottawa. All the people involved waited for a response – Spence, Riel, Dumont, the English Canadians, the half-breeds, and the Metis. Nothing. They celebrated Christmas with their families and over-indulged at New Year's parties. Nothing. They suffered through the cold nights of January. They had babies and made plans for spring. But still there was no response.

The Lindsay schoolhouse at the Ridge was the site of several meetings in the early days of the rebellion. Ann's son, James Adams, had built the new schoolhouse beside his homestead using the same rough-hewn log construction as in the church and houses. My sister took a photograph of it almost one hundred years later for the 1980 family reunion, but by then, it was an outbuilding on a farm. Looking at the photo, I can imagine men arriving by foot, on horseback, and by horse-and-buggy to hear Louis Riel soon after he arrived from Montana. There would have been a low hum, a rumble of male voices, excited at the prospect of seeing him. Riel likely came from Batoche by horse in an entourage of men that included his military strategist, Gabriel Dumont. The leaders at the Ridge included Andrew Spence, Charles Adams, William Pocha, and Thomas Scott (who would later be tried for felony-treason).

When word came on March 20 that some Metis men had looted a store just seventeen miles away in Duck Lake, cut the telegraph lines, and taken five prisoners, the men of the Ridge held a meeting at the Lindsay schoolhouse. They knew that Riel had established a council of twelve men and declared a provisional government just two days earlier. Gabriel Dumont was organizing a militia along the lines of the buffalo hunt, with several groups of eleven men, each with a unit commander.<sup>237</sup> Ann's sons and neighbours decided to send a delegation to Batoche to assess the situation – Thomas Scott, Hugh Ross and William Pocha. Pocha would testify months later at the trial of Thomas Scott that they heard there was trouble and wanted to know what was happening. Besides, he would claim, the women were afraid of the Indians.<sup>238</sup> The three men were detained by Riel at Batoche for several hours until his scouts returned, and when released, they carried a letter from him to 'les autres Metis' (the other Metis). 'The Ottawa government has been maliciously ignoring the rights of the original half-breeds', he wrote, and answered our peaceable complaints by sending more policemen to Fort Carlton. Not only had ninety NWMP men been dispatched from Regina, but a corps of ninety-five volunteers from Prince Albert was also on its way to the fort.

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<sup>237</sup> My nephew is descended from both sides of this conflict. On his mother's side, he is the three-times-great grandson of Ann Heywood Adams, and on his father's side, he is the great-great grandson of Napoleon Arcand, who was in company #16 of Gabriel Dumont's militia.

<sup>238</sup> Sessional Papers, No. 52, Trial of Thomas Scott

Ann's menfolk attended another meeting at the Lindsay schoolhouse on March 22 when Captain Crozier of the NWMP, stationed at Fort Carlton, recruited an Anglican minister to meet with the English half-breeds at the Ridge, Red Deer Hill, and Prince Albert.<sup>239</sup> Charles Adams and Andrew Spence were among the signatories of resolutions developed at those meetings. While we sympathize with the French half-breeds, they stated, we 'don't approve of the resort to arms or the raising of the Indians and wish to remain neutral'.<sup>240</sup> While two men headed to Batoche with copies of the resolutions, Charles Adams and William Miller began the trek to Fort Carlton on snow-covered trails. Their copy never reached Crozier at the fort, however, because as they drew near, they heard of trouble at nearby Duck Lake and turned back.<sup>241</sup>

There were two more meetings at the schoolhouse, on March 23 and 24, before the conflict erupted into a battle and men died. At the final one, Riel tried one last time to recruit the half-breeds of the Ridge, but to no avail. They were determined to be neutral.

## March 1885 Prince Albert, Northwest Territories

The first skirmish in a series that the Canadian government would later call the Northwest Rebellion<sup>242</sup> lasted only thirty minutes on March 26, 1885. Earlier in the day, nineteen men from Fort Carlton, on their way to Duck Lake for supplies, had encountered Riel's militia. They returned to the fort, where Crozier quickly organized a force of fifty-three NWMP and forty-one Prince Albert Volunteers. By the time they reached the Metis, Gabriel Dumont had positioned his thirty men among the trees and in a house along the trail. Men were sent out from each side to parley, someone fired, and a brief battle began. The Metis lost five men, including Dumont's brother, Isidore, and an elderly Cree chief, Assiwyin.<sup>243</sup> Twelve of Crozier's men were killed and eleven wounded (nine of those killed were Prince Albert Volunteers). Crozier retreated to the fort, packed quickly, and left, taking his men to Prince Albert. As the last man left, the fort caught on fire (and wasn't rebuilt until 1976 when it became a National Historic Site.<sup>244</sup>)

The day before the Battle of Duck Lake, the federal government had dispatched troops in response to Riel's demand for Fort Carlton to surrender or be destroyed in a 'war of extermination'.<sup>245</sup> Five thousand men made the journey to Qu'Appelle in only five days on the partially-completed national railway, walking some sections and riding in wagons in others.

The day after the battle, Ann's family left their farms to seek refuge in Prince Albert, where a stockade had been hastily erected around the large Presbyterian church. Her family's

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<sup>239</sup> Rev. Matheson held meetings at St. Catherine's, St. Andrew's Halcro, and the Lindsay schoolhouse.

<sup>240</sup> Sessional Papers, vol 12, 43-47 Supplementary Return

<sup>241</sup> Sessional Papers, Vol. 1 (1886), p. 52-153. On the same day, James Isbister and George William Sanderson took a copy of the resolutions to Riel and the rebels.

<sup>242</sup> John A. Macdonald's government discussed whether to elevate the 'domestic trouble' to the 'rank of rebellion', rather than speaking of it as 'a common riot'. It suited their purposes to convince the public that harsh measures were needed to prevent an 'Indian war'. Waiser, p. 558

<sup>243</sup> A. Blair Stonechild, *The Indian View of the 1885 Uprising, 1885 and After – Native Society in Transition* (Regina: U. of Regina, 1986), pp.155-170

<sup>244</sup> Some accounts claim that the NWMP deliberately set Fort Carlton on fire as they left. Others describe it as an accident during the flurry of activity as they left.

<sup>245</sup> Sessional Papers, vol 12, pp. 43-45



homesteads were in a precarious location, where the trails from Duck Lake, Fort Carlton, and Batoche converged at the Ridge. If the Metis and their Indian allies attacked Prince Albert, they would use this route. Most of the families around Prince Albert abandoned their farms at this time and stayed in town for the following fifty-three days. One thousand people were billeted all over town, as well as in the NWMP barracks, and told to seek shelter within the church if the alarm rang.

A family story places my great-grandfather, then five years old, in a church with other children. The Adams family didn't take sides, so the story goes, so they hid the women and children.<sup>246</sup> Ann and her family must have been in Prince Albert the day the alarm was sounded. As the sun set one evening, scouts at the Ridge thought they saw men on horseback. A scout galloped into town; the church bell rang. Women and children ran into the church and, according to the newspaper, some tottered inside and fell fainting to the ground, while others had to be carried in.<sup>247</sup> After several hours of sitting on a cold floor in the over-crowded church, the sighting was declared a false alarm. There never was an attack on Prince Albert.

There were three separate incidents in the following six weeks that contributed to people's fears across the Northwest Territories. Big Bear's warriors, angry at the government and its agents for reducing rations promised in Treaty Six and emboldened by word of the Metis victory at Duck Lake, killed most of the people attending a church service in Frog Lake (50 miles north of Lloydminster). The old chief tried to stop his men, but they shot the Indian agent, farm instructor, two priests, and five other men on April 2, 1885.<sup>248</sup> One month later, NWMP forces from Battleford arrived at Chief Poundmaker's reserve near Cut Knife Hill (25 miles west of Battleford), intending to punish the band for pillaging the town while residents were hiding at the nearby police barracks. Although the Cree were outnumbered, they had a strategic advantage in the hilly terrain and the NWMP were forced to retreat.<sup>249</sup> The final battle for Riel's Metis ended on May 9 when Captain Middleton's eight hundred men overwhelmed the two hundred at Batoche.<sup>250</sup> Riel surrendered, and Dumont fled to the United States. Ten days later, Middleton's troops entered Prince Albert and the siege was over.

Ann's family returned to their farms at the Ridge, where her daughter Maria's experience, remembered generations later by her descendants, was typical: the animals had been taken by the Metis militia and it was too late to plant crops.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> The family story suggests that the children hid in St. Paul's Lindsay Church at the Ridge. It's more likely that young Thomas Henry Adams and the other children were in the Presbyterian church in Prince Albert.

<sup>247</sup> Prince Albert Times, August 7, 1885

<sup>248</sup> F. Laurie Barron, *Indian Agents and the North-West Rebellion, 1885 and After – Native Society in Transition*, pp.139-154. Thomas Quinn, Indian agent, and John Delaney, farm instructor, were killed at the Frog Lake Massacre. Quinn was known as a bully with an explosive temper who was contemptuous of Indian society and stubbornly refused to give rations without work (which was government policy at the time).

<sup>249</sup> At the Battle of Cut Knife Hill, fourteen soldiers were wounded and eight killed. Three native men were wounded and five killed.

<sup>250</sup> Eight of Middleton's men died and forty-six were wounded. Sixteen Metis were killed and 20-30 wounded.

<sup>251</sup> Evidence of the 1885 Rebellion can be found in homestead applications, in which farmers admitted to a gap in residency. They needed to work the land for five consecutive years before gaining title to it.



Before the Battle - The Rebels who fought Middleton - Drilling under Dumont - The Rebel Lieutenant, haranguing his Force.  
 (FROM A SKETCH BY AN EX-MEMBER OF THE N. W. MOUNTED POLICE)

*Harper's Weekly, New York, 9 May 1885*

*Before the Battle*

*Gabriel Dumont organized the Métis forces into units of eleven men like a buffalo hunt. (Image: Harper's Weekly, 9 May 1885)*



REFUGEES IN THE NORTH-WEST FLEEING TO THE TOWNS FOR PROTECTION. SCENE ON THE ROAD LEADING TO PRINCE ALBERT  
 FROM A SKETCH BY AN EX-MEMBER OF THE MOUNTED POLICE

*Montreal Daily Star, 18 April 1885*

*Refugees Fleeing 1885*

*Maria, her husband and their three children were among the refugees who fled to Prince Albert during the 1885 Northwest Rebellion. She had her fourth child on May 4 at the barracks. When the family returned to their farm, they "found the house still standing but the chickens, lambs and pigs were either dead or missing and the cattle were scattered." (image: Montreal Daily Star 1885)*

## November 1885 Prince Albert, Northwest Territories

The government moved quickly to bring the 'rebels' to trial, demonstrating to the indigenous people and the Canadian electorate that they were in control. Louis Riel was found guilty of high treason and hanged in November. Twenty-six Metis soldiers were tried for felony-treason and, of these, eleven sentenced to seven years in jail. Chiefs One Arrow, Big Bear, and Poundmaker served time in Stony Mountain Penitentiary and each died soon after release.<sup>252</sup> Fourteen of Big Bear's warriors were sentenced to two years in prison. The final trials were held in Battleford, where sixty Indians were held. Eight men were hanged there on November 27 and buried in a mass grave.

Two men were found not guilty. Dakota Sioux chief, Whitecap, was a member of Riel's governing council, but a witness confirmed that he had been at Batoche against his will.<sup>253</sup> The second was Thomas Scott of the Ridge who had attended meetings of English half-breeds (as had Charles Adams and Andrew Spence), but was not at either the Duck Lake or Batoche battles.<sup>254</sup>

The department of Indian Affairs identified twenty-eight bands as disloyal and suspended the annuity payments promised in treaties. A 'pass system' that required residents to apply to the Indian Agent before leaving the reserve was applied to all bands, whether loyal or not.

Ann's family must have felt vulnerable in the aftermath of 1885. The Prince Albert Times chastised the 'English half-breeds and Canadian settlers who had deliberately aided and abetted the sending for Riel', which included everyone who lived at the Ridge. That's likely when they fell silent about their involvement and why generations later many people don't know about their English Metis roots.<sup>255</sup>

Ann's children became successful farmers. A local business directory described the success of the Ridge and the Red Deer Hill area: "It is the most thickly settled, and the majority of the farmers are in comfortable circumstances, having numerous horses, cattle and sheep."<sup>256</sup> Ann's grandchildren married and started their own farms. Robert and Charles Adams, as well as Andrew Spence, were appointed justices of the peace<sup>257</sup>; Charles became an Indian Agent and later a ferry operator; and Robert was postmaster for Kirkpatrick. It seems they didn't suffer from the stigma of the rebellion and may even have benefitted from remaining neutral.

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<sup>252</sup> In 2018, Poundmaker was pardoned by the Canadian government for his peace-keeping efforts in 1885.

<sup>253</sup> Dictionary of Canadian Biography - Whitecap. Gerald Willoughby of Saskatoon was the witness in Whitecap's defence.

<sup>254</sup> Sessional Papers, No. 52 – Trial of Thomas Scott

<sup>255</sup> P.J. Code, *Les Autres Metis: The English Metis of the Prince Albert Settlement 1862-86*, p.72

<sup>256</sup> McPhillips, Henry Thomas. *McPhillips' Alphabetical and Business Directory of the District of Saskatchewan, NWT 1888*.

<sup>257</sup> *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Year 1890*. Printed by Order of Parliament (1891) Ottawa: Brown Chamberlin, p. 8, 11, 12.

Although the Minister of the Interior visited Prince Albert in October 1885 and arranged for seed grain to be delivered to the farmers who had lost a season due to the Rebellion, changes by the federal government came slowly.<sup>258</sup> The Depression continued for another decade and Prince Albert's growth stalled. A drought in 1886 was followed by two years of bumper crops, but prices were low and markets scarce. By 1890, the first train arrived in Prince Albert and gradually the Red River carts disappeared and the trails that had brought Ann's family to the area ten years earlier, were abandoned.

## January 1898 Prince Albert, Northwest Territories

Ann died in 1898 at age 83. (Her siblings predeceased her – Charles Heywood died in about 1890; Elizabeth Heywood Knight in 1897.) Her obituary noted that hers was “perhaps the biggest funeral in the adjoining country around Prince Albert” when about forty vehicles accompanied the remains to St. Paul's Lindsay Church. She had eight children, sixty-eight grandchildren, and seventy-three great-grandchildren. “She always was a kind and good mother and grandmother, and her memory is blessed by her numerous descendants.”<sup>259</sup>

The church was taken down in 1987, but the graveyard is still used. It sits beside a sandy rural road atop a small hill a few miles north of Macdowall, Saskatchewan. Looking to the east, you can see Red Deer Hill. Most days it's quiet. The breeze whispers through the spruce trees. Cumulous clouds fill the eastern sky. Grasshoppers sing.

My family visited Lindsay Cemetery regularly. We pulled the cars onto the rough-mowed grass outside of the fence and set up our lawn chairs beside the church bell. My mother walked amongst the headstones and we followed, listening to her talk about each ancestor in turn. The place was filled with chatter, laughter and the smell of coffee and sandwiches. There was no sorrow in this. Ann had a long full life and she was surrounded by family. The obelisk marking Ann's grave is the tallest in the cemetery, a testament to her status amongst the people at the time.

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<sup>258</sup> Gary W.D. Abrams, *Prince Albert: The First Century*, p. 81

<sup>259</sup> Obituary, Ann (Heywood) Adams, *Prince Albert Advocate*, January 1898.

# Afterword

It may seem that James Isham's descendants were well on the way to becoming British Canadians by Ann Heywood's generation, but her children and grandchildren married into other Red River families that enriched the tree with people of Cree, Orkney, Welsh and French ancestry. By 1900, my great-grandfather, Thomas Henry Adams, applied for 'half-breed scrip' in Prince Albert when the Canadian government extended the program to include children born between the 1870 Red River Resistance and the 1885 Northwest Rebellion. My grandfather, Chuck Adams, was born a few years later, the sixth generation of Anglo-Cree descendants of Isham. When Chuck moved his young family from the farm to the city in 1925, he was continuing generations of choices and circumstances that would ensure the assimilation of his children and grandchildren.

Chuck and Cora, the daughter of Danish immigrants, adapted well to city life. He had several good jobs ranging from bookkeeper at a meat-packing plant to manager of a farm equipment dealership. She was a stay-at-home mother. Even in the 1930s when many people were unemployed Chuck managed to bring in a buck or two by playing his fiddle at dances and on the radio. He lobbied for state medicine years before the CCF party was elected and in retirement advocated for seniors. He was a modern Canadian success story, but even so people judged him by his dark skin and Asian eyes. In 1960, when he was hired to be a school caretaker, the recruiter told him that he must be punctual and work hard to be a credit to 'your people'. His people were indigenous, and Canadian society had by this time created a stereotype of the drunken Indian operating on Indian time.

The Canadian census provides regular snapshots of the racialized thinking about indigenous people that evolved in society at large and shows how Isham's descendants self-identified over decades. In the 1870 Manitoba census, taken when the Red River colony became part of Canada, Ann Heywood had three choices – half-breed, white or Indian. She selected half-breed and in a subsequent question identified as English half-breed. By 1901, Thomas Henry Adams, her grandson, chose to be 'red' in a new system that divided races into white, black, yellow and red. He also selected 'English breed', while his wife chose 'French breed'. (Florence May Pocha was actually both because her ancestors were French Canadian, Orcadian, and Cree.) By 1911, the colour question was dropped, and Thomas Henry claimed his 'racial or tribal origin' was English, which was true if one followed the male line as demanded by the census. In 1921, when my grandfather, Chuck Adams, was seventeen there was no indication that the family was half-breed. It seems that the Adams family stopped identifying as indigenous soon after Saskatchewan became a province.

My mother's work on our genealogy at the same time as the federal government declared in the constitution that Metis had historical rights, raised the family's awareness of our ethnic legacy. We were not alone. In 1996, just two years after mom's book was published, the government convened the *Royal Commission of Aboriginal People* at a time when only about two hundred thousand people admitted to being Metis on the census. Ten years later, almost double that number responded that they were Metis. Thousands, tens of thousands, of people decided the time was right to declare themselves and break their silence about their ancestors.

The number of self-identified Metis continued to increase as court cases affirmed their rights and reconciliation efforts confronted the truth about past efforts to assimilate indigenous people. The conversations in my family continue to this day. Are we Metis or not?

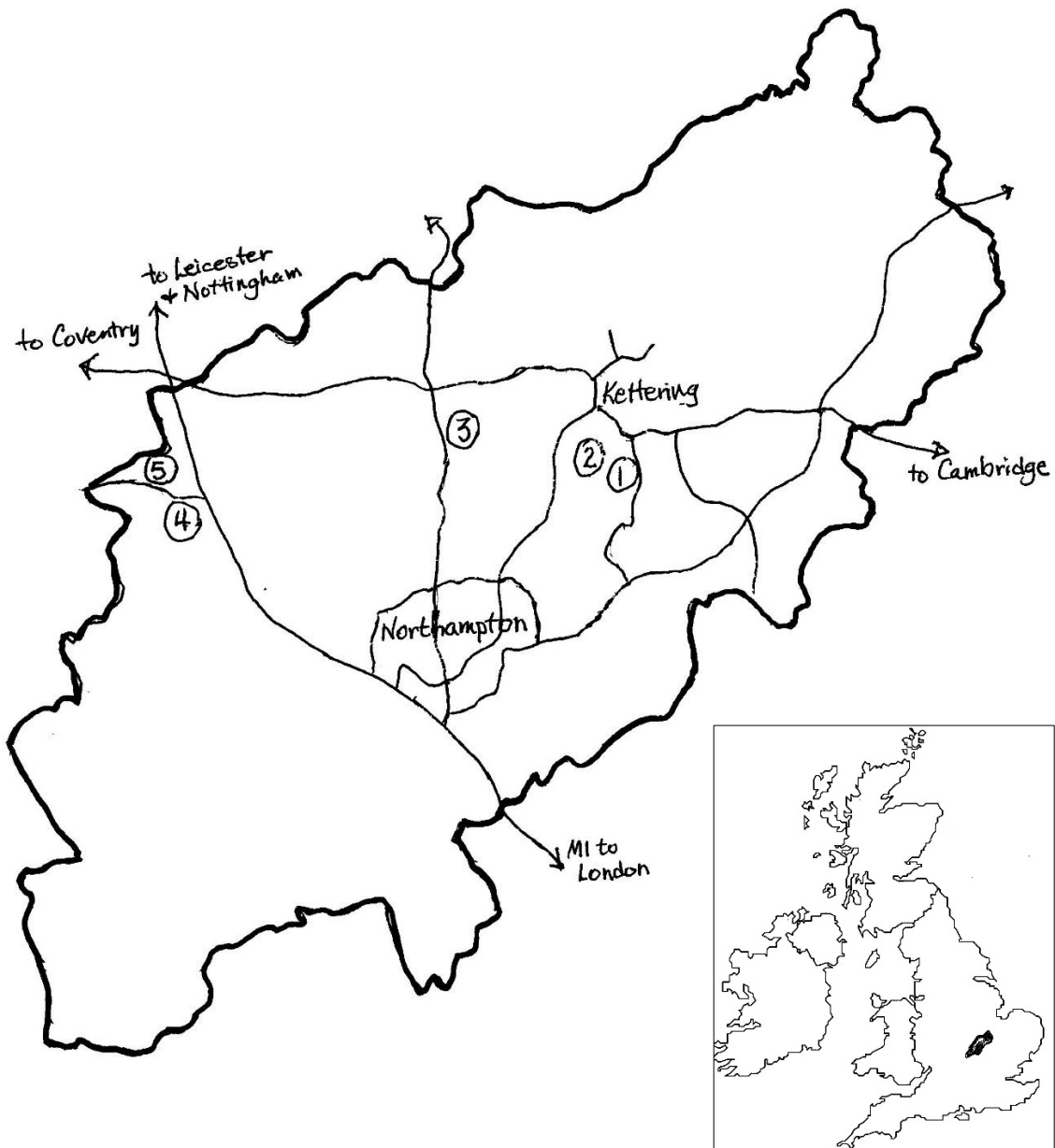
Having uncovered the lives of my ancestors, I now understand what my mother meant when I asked her what label she would use for our ethnicity. If not “half-breed” or “Métis”, then what? She replied, “Canadian.” We are descended from the indigenous people who have been in the Americas for thousands of years. We are descended from the French who settled along the St. Lawrence River in the seventeenth century. We are descended from the British fur traders on the shores of Hudson Bay, the Selkirk settlers who created the Red River colony, and generations of new people sometimes called “half-breeds”. We are the embodiment of the origins of Canada.



*Verna Adams Redhead & Ann Heywood Adams*

*Verna and two cousins published 'The Descendants of George Adams and Ann Heywood'. (photo – P. Redhead)*

## Appendices – Family Trees



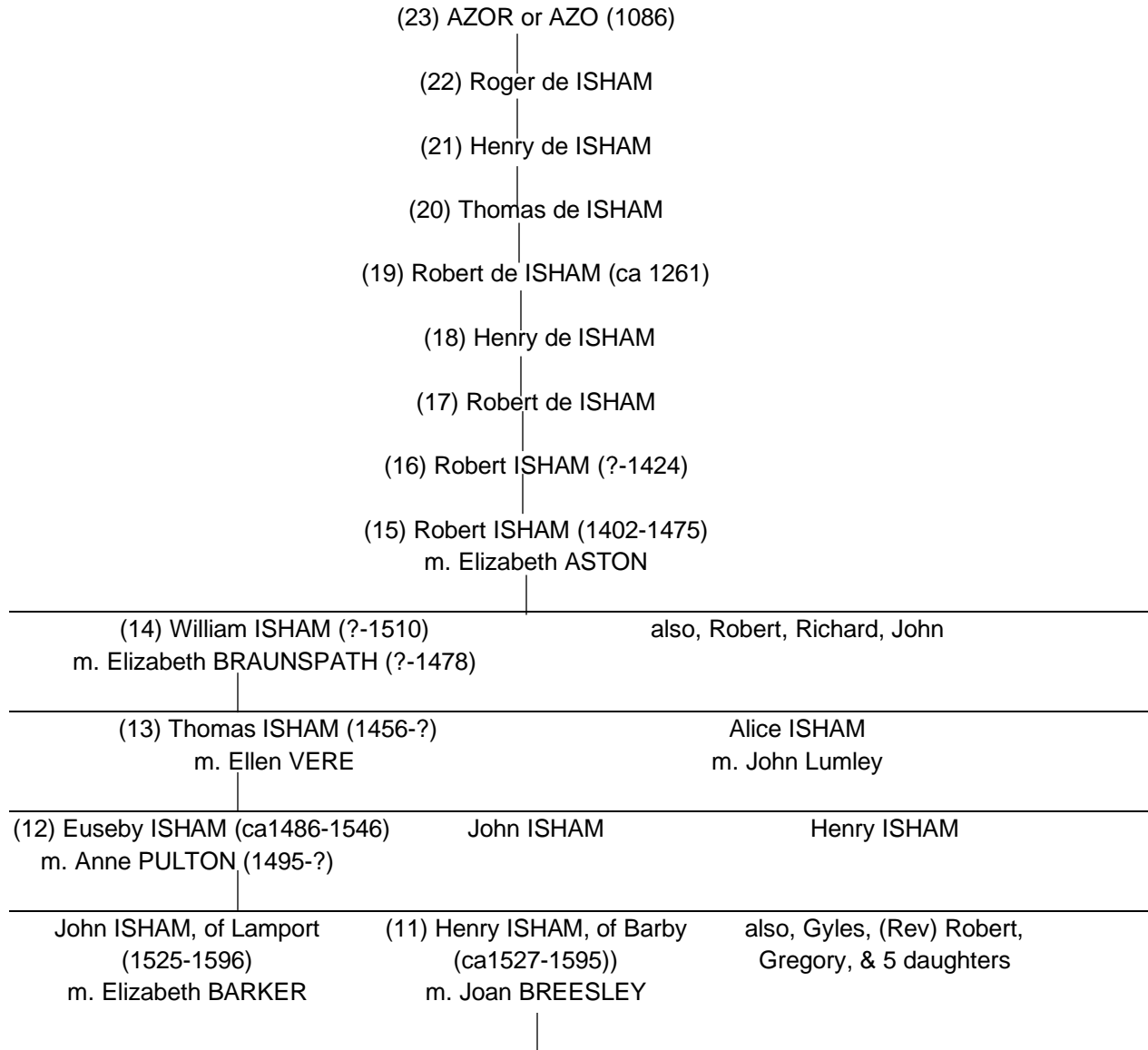
*Isham Family in Northamptonshire*

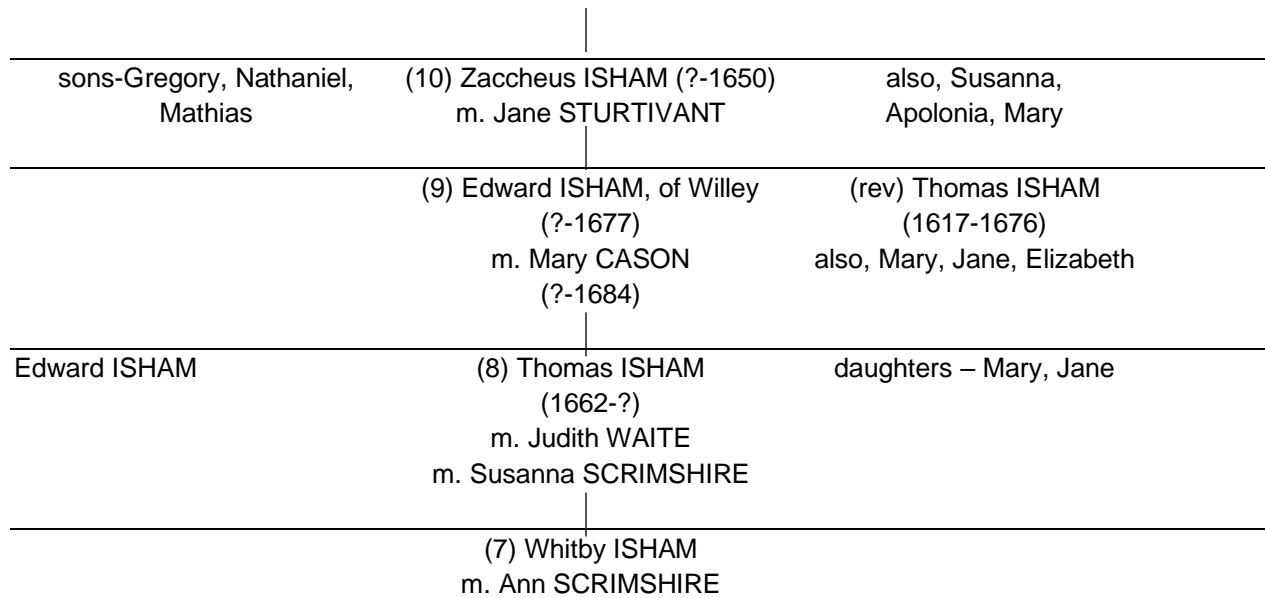
*The Isham family lived in a small area that included the villages of (1) Isham, (2) Pytchley, (3) Lamport, (4) Barby and (5) Rugby. The nearest cities today are Kettering, Northampton and Coventry. (small map FamilySearch; handdrawn map P. Redhead)*



## Appendix A - Family tree of distant ancestors

The earliest written record of the Isham family is in the *1086 Domesday Book*, and the line from AZOR to Henry ISHAM of Barby is documented in *The Baronetage of England* (1801). The numbers in brackets indicate the relationship to the author, e.g. Henry Isham of Barby is my eleven-times-great grandfather.

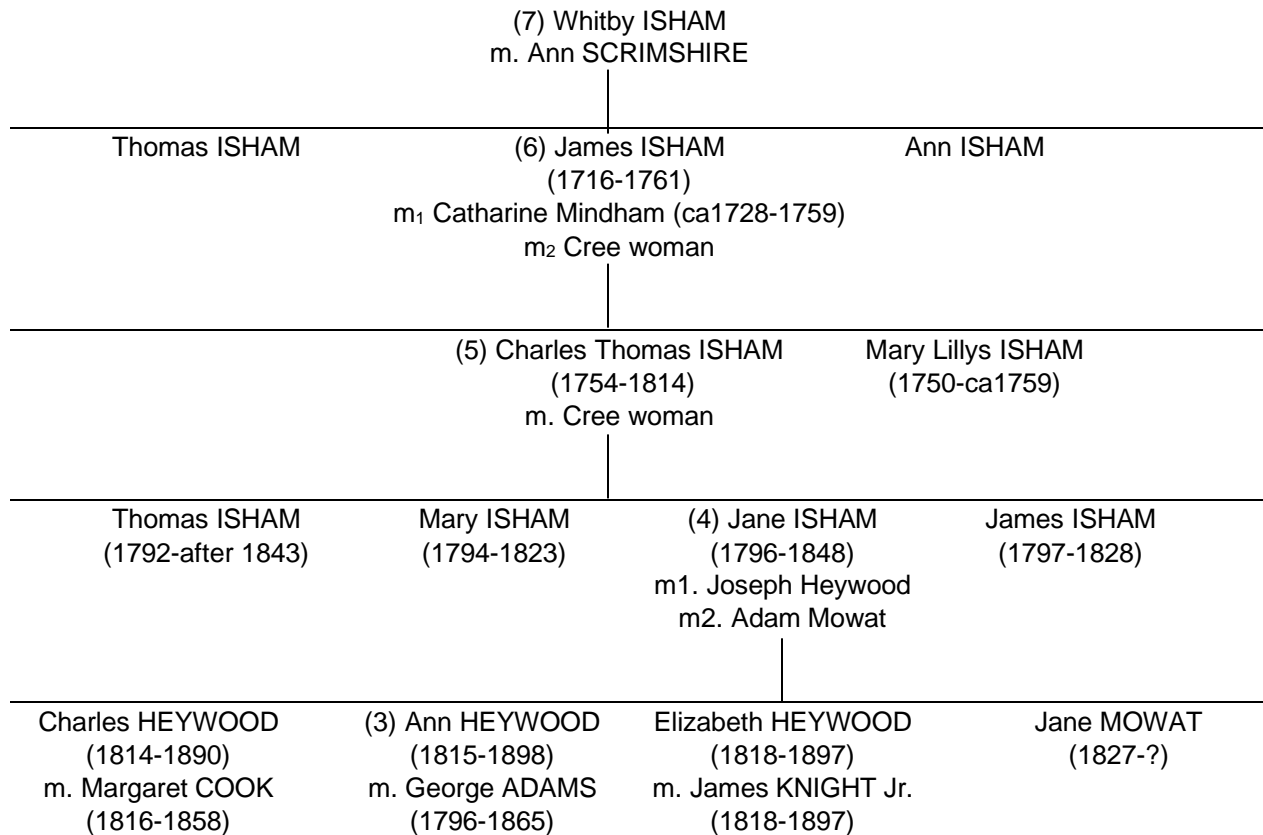




James Isham's ancestors lived in the Midlands of England for at least 650 years before his father moved to Holborn outside of London. Whether they had been there since Roman Times (43-410 AD); had arrived from the continent during the Anglo-Saxon era (410-1066 AD); or were a product of the Danish occupation (877-1042 AD) is unknown. The earliest written record of the Isham family was in the 1086 Domesday Book a few years after William 'the Conqueror' of Normandy took control. Azor was named in the book as a landholder who would be taxed by the new king. Perhaps he was a Norman, newly arrived to be given property once possessed by the old English aristocracy (most of whom fled to Scotland, Ireland, and Scandinavia after the Conquest). His descendants 'of Isham' would continue to live in the same area of present-day Northamptonshire for seventeen generations until Whitby Isham relocated to London.

Five hundred years later, the family had reached its peak of power and prestige. The estate at Isham had long since passed into other families through Isham daughters, but the family was established a few miles away at Pytchley. The children of Eusby Isham and Anne Pulton were successful. GYLES studied law and was elected to parliament. ROBERT attended Cambridge and became one of Queen Mary's chaplains as well as the rector at Pytchley. GREGORY was a rich merchant in London and bought an estate at Braunston near Rugby. His son and heir, Eusby, was knighted in 1603. JOHN of Lamport was a merchant adventurer who held important positions in London and bought Lamport Manor. His grandson, John, became the first Baronet, i.e. Isham of Lamport. HENRY of Barby was a textiles dealer in London. He became comptroller of the customs during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and married Joan (or Jane) Breesley who belong to the Queen's wardrobe. There were also five daughters who married well.

## Appendix B: Family tree of Ann Heywood



*NOTE: The authors of The Descendants of George Adams & Ann Heywood concluded that Jane Isham (Asham) was descended from James Isham but admitted to a gap in their research that made it impossible to confirm the name of her father. Her baptismal record states that James Asham was her father, but no other records have been found to confirm this. She wasn't the daughter of the original James Isham because that would make her sixty at the time of her baptism and records show she had a baby a few years later. Perhaps she was the daughter of a son not named in James Isham's will. Or, perhaps there was a generation between Charles Thomas Isham and Jane. There is no evidence of these theories, but there is evidence that Jane's father was Charles Thomas Isham. The obituary of her daughter, Ann Adams (1898), states 'her mother was the daughter of C. F. Asham' of the HBC. It should read C.T. Asham but was a typographical error or an error by the writer. The will of Charles Thomas Isham established an annuity for four children (Thomas, Mary, Jane, James) and the HBC Fort Gary Account Book (HBCA E.7/34) is likely a record of the annuity payments.*

George ADAMS (1796–1865)  
Ann HEYWOOD (1815–1898)

Ann Nancy ADAMS (1835–1931)  
m. John FOULDS (1830-1903)

George ADAMS (1837-1916)  
m. Mary COOK (c1833-1914)

Charles ADAMS (1838-1919)  
m. Ann NORQUAY (1846-1932)

m. William ADAMS (1840-1844)

Joseph ADAMS (1842-1903)  
m1. Ann Elizabeth BIRD (1844-1870)  
m2. Christina FRANKS (1848-1929)

James ADAMS (1844-1925)  
m. Elizabeth BRUCE (1847-1926)

Henry ADAMS (1846-1847)

Robert ADAMS (1848-1918)  
m. Ann POCHA (1850-1916)

Elizabeth Barbara ADAMS (1850-1873)  
m. George SANDERSON (1846-1936)

Sarah ADAMS (1854-1854)

Mary ADAMS (1856-1934)  
m. Charles James COOK (1850-1928)

Maria ADAMS (1860 – 1936)  
m. George Charles SPENCE (1858-1926)

*NOTE: To trace subsequent generations, see 'The Descendants of George Adams & Ann Heywood' which can be downloaded from the FamilySearch website.*

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- HBCA B.42//23-27 Churchill post journal, 1741-1745
- HBCA B.154/a/2-3 Jack River post journal, 1797-1799
- HBCA B.203/a/1-2 Marlborough House post journal, 1794-1796
- HBCA B.213/a/1-6 Swan River House post journal, 1790-1795
- HBCA, B.235/a/7, fos. 32d-46d. Upper Fort Garry post journal, May – July 1826
- HBCA B.239/a/15 York Factory post journal, 1732-33
- HBCA B.239/a/20-22 York Factory post journal, 1737-41
- HBCA B.239/a/28 York Factory post journal, 1746-47
- HBCA B.239/a/ 33 York Factory post journal, 1749-50
- HBCA B.239/a/37 York Factory post journal, 1753-54
- HBCA B.239/a/39 York Factory post journal, 1754-55
- HBCA B.239/a/41-49 York Factory post journal, 1755-61
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