

Fur Trading

Each attempting to gain an advantage over the rival company, the first fur traders were drawn to our Capital region to harvest the plentiful fur resources that were rapidly becoming depleted in areas downstream.

When the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company arrived to build their trading posts in the Fort Saskatchewan area in 1795, there had already been among the Aboriginal people a land-use system of gathering, hunting, trapping and trading in the area for possibly thousands of years. Groups of Cree assembled in certain areas in hundreds of tipis (for example, at the present-day Birch Hills and Rossdale Flats) to feast, carry out ceremonies, and build canoes of the locally abundant birch bark. This attracted the traders to build their forts nearby in order to access the aboriginal hunters.

In 1754 Anthony Henday traveled further west than any European previously, with the assistance of Cree guides. He stopped at the Birch Hills near the mouth of the Sturgeon River on his way back to York Factory in March, 1755. There, he built birch bark canoes to carry him and his abundant harvest of furs back to the Hudson's Bay. In 1760, he left the Capital Region with 61 canoes weighed down with fur to take back to York Factory.

In 1788, Peter Pangman built an independent trading post near present day Edmonton.

In 1795, James Hughes of the North West Company built a trading post at the forks of the Sturgeon and North Saskatchewan rivers, near present-day Fort Saskatchewan. It was called "Fort Augustus" (named after Augustus Frederick, the Prince of Wales). The Hudson's Bay Company promptly sent William Tomison, who built "Edmonton House" (named after the birthplace of Sir James Winter Lake, the deputy governor of the HBC, in Middlesex, England) immediately nearby.

Over 42,000 Made Beaver (1 Made Beaver/MB = 1 beaver pelt or other fur in beaver pelt equivalencies) were transported east from Edmonton House (Fort Edmonton) between 1796 and 1799.

By 1802, the resources (firewood and furs) in the area were becoming depleted. Rather than haul wood to the fort, both forts were relocated 44km upstream to the present site of the Rossdale power plant. This was completed by 1812–13. In 1812, reports from Fort Edmonton include not only shipments of the usual loads of fur and pemmican, but also 1296 swanskins and 450 "hundred weight of swan quills". The posts had become agriculture and provisioning centres, as well as the most westerly points that crews from the east could reach before winter freeze-up.



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Legendary Canadian mapmaker David Thompson, his wife Charlotte, and their three children made their first trip through the Capital Region in 1806/07 (on behalf of the North West Company), heading west to Rocky Mountain House and beyond. At times, they traveled at night, in order to gain advantage over explorers from the Hudson's Bay Company. From the age of 14 in 1784, David Thompson spent 28 years exploring and surveying the North Saskatchewan River. At times, he used Fort Edmonton as his "address".

Fort Edmonton soon became a major supplier of York boats on the river, as in due course, the fur traders switched from canoes to York boats to haul their goods. Eighteen men in York boats could haul a load that it took forty men to carry in canoes. Most boatmen were Orkney Islanders or Métis, and their working pace was cruel. From Edmonton House, it was 2000 kilometers to York Factory on Hudson Bay, with lakes, rivers, rapids and portages to travel in between. The colorful sashes that they wrapped around their waist – characteristic of the "voyageurs" – gave the men essential support while they lifted 40 kg packs. Strangulated hernia was the most common cause of death among the voyageurs.

In 1826, the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company merged, and the enterprise became known solely as Edmonton House. It had become one of the most important trading posts on the North Saskatchewan River (eventually evolving into a public retail business with the diminishing of the fur trade in the 1870's). After a flood, the fort was relocated in 1830 to higher ground. Its final location was just below the site of the present Alberta Legislature.

The "Horse Hills" was originally the site of the 'horse-guard' – a place where fort horses and sometimes cattle were guarded and pastured.

Areas called 'plantations' were around every fur trade fort. These were campsites of the various aboriginal groups who came to trade and visit every season. At any given time, outside of the fort, there would have been from five to several hundred tents set up for days, weeks, and in some cases, even months.

Joseph Edward Brazeau was clerk and postmaster for the HBC at Fort Edmonton in 1830. Of Spanish-French origin, he spoke 9 languages and in his flowing cloak and flat black hat, looked more like Zorro than a typical fur trader. He was very helpful to the Palliser Expedition.

Scientific expeditions on the river included the Palliser Expedition (Dr. James Hector) in 1852 and the Flemming Expedition (Sir Sanford Flemming) in 1872.

Edmonton and area residents were still almost 2000 km from the nearest post office, and



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2640 km from the nearest railway station, even in 1873.

The Dominion of Canada purchased the governing rights to the Edmonton area from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870, and huge areas of land were offered for purchase. Settlement then began outside of the fort walls. John Walter quit the fur trade and by 1875 established a ferry and a boat-building business across the river from the fort.

Father Albert Lacombe first came to Fort Edmonton in a York boat in 1852. On a return visit in 1882, he mourned, "Where has my wilderness gone?" Edmonton now had a telegraph wire, a printing press, and a schoolhouse. The Cree hunters and their families had been sent to reside on reserves, and the buffalo were gone. Fort Edmonton was dismantled in 1915 (today's structure at Fort Edmonton is a replica).

A stone cairn marking the sites of the original Fort Augustus and Edmonton House was erected in 1926, near Fort Saskatchewan.

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