

Forts and Their Farms: An Outline of the Agricultural Foundations of Hudson's Bay Company Establishments in the Pacific Northwest

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Introduction

At the time of the founding of Fort Victoria in 1843 there was an established and widespread network of Hudson's Bay Company forts and posts in the Pacific Northwest¹. From Fort Vancouver in the south to Fort Stikine in present day Alaska, this chain of establishments comprised a highly efficient, though interdependent, arrangement of mutually beneficial commerce. Although the Hudson's Bay Company had a much broader presence throughout what is today known as western Canada and the northwestern United States, the purpose of this essay is to give a brief description of only those forts which were built after the founding of Fort Vancouver in 1824. The focus will also be limited to those forts that traded directly with Fort Victoria, as can be seen in many entries throughout the journals, effectively reducing the scope to coastal establishments and those with access to the coast by boat. As will be noted, however, even within this relatively small selection there existed a great variety of geographies, both cultural and physical, which lent themselves to different functions and areas of specialization for each fort.

¹ For a complete and easy to read overview of these forts as well as those in the interiors of both the United States and British Columbia, see Kenneth E. Perry, *Forts and Posts of the Hudson's Bay Company* (Vancouver: Hancock House Publishers, 2006)



To understand how an establishment such as Fort Victoria could be built and maintained in its early years it is essential to see it not as a separate entity but rather as an appendage of a larger structure with its own role in the functioning of the whole. Even a superficial perusal of the Fort's journals shows that it was extremely dependent on the other appendages of the structure known as the HBC, not only for foodstuffs but for equipment, goods, merchandise, advice and personnel. This brief overview of some these appendages is intended to demonstrate how one aspect of that interdependence –agriculture -- came to play a central role in the resource extraction and Euro-American settlement of the Pacific Northwest.

In 1825 HBC Governor Sir George Simpson summed up his opinions regarding the importance of agriculture to the fur trade in a letter to Hudson's Bay Company directors in London. "It has been said", he wrote, "that farming is no branch of the fur trade but I consider that every pursuit tending to lighten the expense of the trade is a branch thereof."² This simple quote says a lot about the state of the Hudson's Bay Company at the time and is indicative of Simpson's push to reduce Company expenses by making forts and posts as self-sufficient as possible.³ Furthermore, it can be read as an attempt by the Governor to gauge his superiors' position on the matter. He was no doubt considering the potential for economic gain in the monopolization of what he perceived to be an inevitably growing market. Not only were the very first Euro-American settlers beginning to trickle into the region at this time but Simpson also realized that the Russian fur trading posts on the north coast were under the necessity of shipping almost all of their provisions all the way from Russia or Chile⁴. This situation would eventually lead to the formation of the Puget Sound Agricultural Company (PSAC) which, as a subsidiary of the HBC committed entirely to farming, profited through the negotiation of a provisioning contract with the Russian-American Company in 1839

² Quoted in Richard Mackie, "Colonial land, Indian Labour and Company Capital: The Economy of Vancouver Island, 1849–1858" (MA Thesis, University of Victoria, 1984) 123

³ Mackie (1984), pg. 123

⁴ James Gibson, *Farming the Frontier: The Agricultural Opening of the Oregon Country, 1786-1846* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985) 82

under which they would supply the Russian forts with such products as wool, hide, tallow, grains and vegetables.⁵

Fort Vancouver



Fort Vancouver, by Henry James Warre, 1845, National Archives of Canada, c001628k.

The oldest and, in its prime, by far the most important of the Hudson's Bay Company's coastal forts in the Pacific Northwest was Fort Vancouver. Established in 1824 about 100 miles from the coast on the north bank of the Columbia River near present day Portland, the Fort was built to replace Fort George which had been located on the south bank near the mouth of that River.

Called *Kathutequa* ("the plain")⁶ by the local Chinook-speaking First Nations, the site was selected by Governor Simpson for both political and geographical reasons.

⁵ Ibid., pg.82

⁶ Ibid., pg. 29

Foremost among these was the British intention of strengthening their claim to lands north of the Columbia River which, it was hoped, would form the northern boundary for the United States in times to come⁷. Another fundamental reason for the decision to relocate was Simpson's increasing desire that fur-trading forts and posts become more self-sufficient in the matter of feeding and maintaining themselves. This was difficult if not impossible at Fort George, which had very little arable land. *Kathutequa*, or "Jolie Prairie" as it had been referred to by French Canadian trappers, appeared an ideal place in this regard.

Practical considerations, however, were not the only ones that recommended the new site to Simpson- he was also struck by the beauty of the place. As he noted in an 1825 letter, "I have rarely seen a Gentleman's Seat in England possessing so many natural advantages and where ornament and use are so agreeably combined...it will in 2 years hence be the finest place in North America".⁸ Whether he recognized that the open and "ornamental" appearance of the prairies was in large part the result of many generations of Aboriginal land management is doubtful, but this was evidently a key factor in his decision-making as it would be in the establishment of almost all of the future forts in the region, including Fort Victoria.

Situated at the centre of several large plains or prairies which rise in broad terraces from the banks of the Columbia River there was ample room for the expansion of farming around Fort Vancouver. By 1828 Simpson's expectations for self-sufficiency

⁷ Ibid., pg. 27

⁸ Frederick Merk, ed., *Fur Trade and Empire: George Simpson's Journal...1824-25* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1968) 123-24

were already being surpassed and, by 1846, the Fort's farms would extend for 25 miles along the River and as far as 10 miles inland⁹. Of this area the vast majority was used for grazing livestock but by 1845 it has been recorded that approximately 1200 acres of land were under cultivation¹⁰. Livestock raised included cattle, horses, pigs, sheep, goats, chickens, turkeys and pigeons of which cattle, sheep and pigs were the most abundant.¹¹ Crops consisted of various grains and grasses as well as legumes, roots, melons, squashes, berries and a variety of orchard fruits with wheat, oats, barley, peas and potatoes being the most widespread. Most of these crops thrived and in 1841 it was noted that wheat and barley were yielding from 20 to 30 bushels per acre. In 1846 total produce for the year included 5000 bushels of wheat, 3000 of oats, 2000 of peas, 300 of barley and 6000 of potatoes. Livestock possessions also expanded rapidly and by 1846 the original 17 cattle transferred from Fort George had multiplied to about 2000. In addition to these, the Fort boasted approximately 500 horses, 800 pigs and 3000 sheep.¹²

As the centre of operations for the Company on the coast for over two decades Fort Vancouver's economic output was not limited to farming and furs. Especially after the late 1820s, when Governor Simpson made a strong push for economic diversification, sawmilling and fishing industries also developed with great success.¹³

Under the able command of Chief Factor John McLoughlin the abundant salmon runs of

⁹ Gibson (1985), pg. 35

¹⁰ Ibid., pg. 36

¹¹ The following farming statistics are taken from Ibid., pg. 38

¹² Ibid., pg. 39

¹³ Richard Mackie, *Trading beyond the Mountains: The British Fur Trade on the Pacific, 1793–1843* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), 44–5.

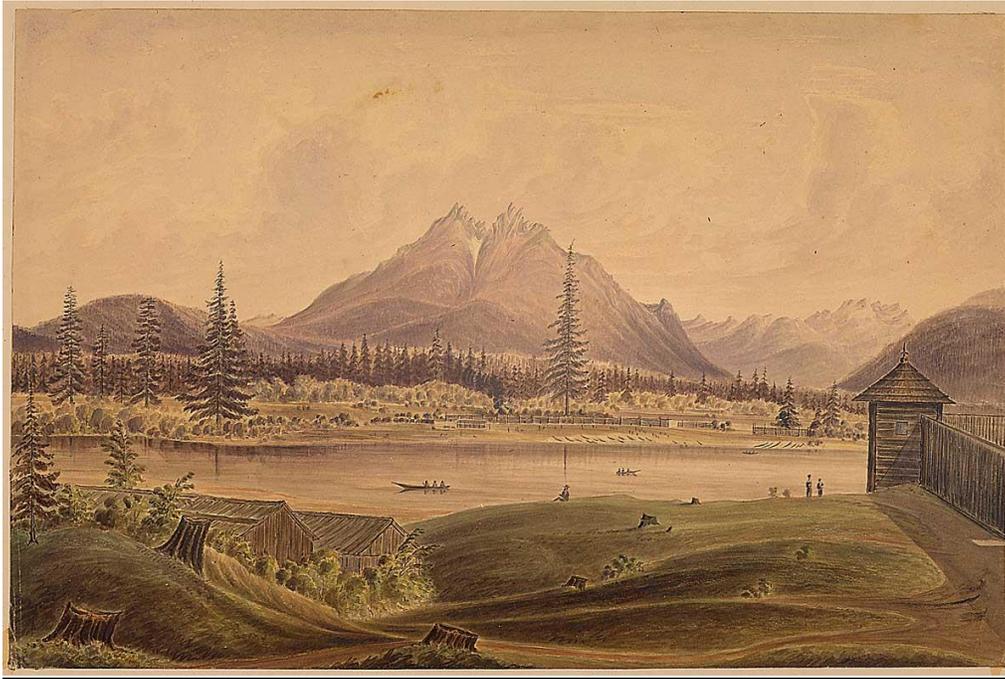
the Columbia River were harvested with increasing efficiency and a mill which he had established on the nearby Willamette River was producing almost a quarter million feet of lumber annually by 1837¹⁴.

Most of the labour at Fort Vancouver was carried out by Aboriginal, Kanaka and French Canadian employees who usually signed up for ten year contracts with annual salaries and rations. The diverse industries of the Fort and mild weather of the region kept them busy year round as did the increasingly high demand for their products.

Although the main market at the time was the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands, much trade and commerce was carried out with England and California. Produce and products from the Fort's farms, mills and fisheries supplied and facilitated the growth of other forts in the region and kept it relatively well connected with the wider world. It was for these reasons that Fort Vancouver became known as the "grand emporium" of the Pacific Northwest.

¹⁴ Gibson (1985), p. 35

Fort Langley



Fort Langley, by James Madison Alden, 1858, National Archives of the United States, RG 76, Entry 221, 09-1424a

Soon after the establishment of Fort Vancouver in 1824 HBC officials began to look further north for a suitable location for a new fort from where the burgeoning coastal fur trade could be more easily accessed and supported. Fort Langley, established in 1828 on the traditional territory of the Kwantlen First Nation near the south bank of the Fraser River, was the result.

The main reasons for the establishment of Fort Langley were to tap into the fur trade of the lower Fraser Valley and eastern Vancouver Island as well as to provision the northern coastal trading posts and vessels operating at the time. Increasingly however, as the fur trade dwindled and the Company generally diversified its sources of wealth, alternative aspects of the Fort came into prominence. Built near a fertile alluvial plain

referred to by trappers as “Langley Prairie”, the area proved to be excellent for agriculture and in the late 1820s it became the first piece of land to be ploughed on the coast of what is now British Columbia.¹⁵ By 1845 employees had more than 240 acres under cultivation.¹⁶ Grains were the primary crops with 750 bushels of wheat, 250 of barley and 500 of oats being produced yearly by 1840. In addition the farm had a fair number of livestock amounting to 240 cattle, 18 horses, 250 pigs and 40 chickens in 1846. The cattle were primarily a dairy herd which was producing over 1000 pounds of butter by 1840, the majority of which was shipped to the Russian America Company forts in Alaska. Lumbering was also experimented with at this early point but did not take hold until much later. Shingles were the primary wood product to be exported from Fort Langley during the 1830s and 40s but even they did not approach revenue brought in by what was to become the primary industry of the fort: fish.

By the early 1830s income from exported salted salmon at Fort Langley was equal to that being brought in by furs.¹⁷ This equaled out to approximately 300 barrels of salmon per year, with each barrel capable of containing upwards of 1000 salmon, the majority of which were shipped to the Sandwich Islands. Demand for this product rose so steadily that by 1845, when it was costing the Company \$4 to salt and pack a single barrel which would sell at Honolulu for \$10, upwards of 1500 of them were being

¹⁵ Mackie (1984), pg. 128

¹⁶ All following farming statistics taken from Gibson (1985), pgs. 50-1

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 51

produced annually.¹⁸ Until the gold rush of 1858 salmon would be the most lucrative product of the Fraser Valley and the mainstay of Fort Langley.

Fort Simpson



Fort Simpson, by Edward Porcher, June 13, 1867, Beinecke Library, 1021842.

Among the northern trading posts which Fort Langley was created to provision, Fort Simpson was the largest and would prove to be the most long-lived. Built near the mouth of the Nass River in late-1831 to compete with Russian and American fur trade rivals in the area, the Fort was later relocated to the Tsimshian Peninsula near present day Prince Rupert to better facilitate shipping.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., pg. 51

¹⁹ Perry (2006), pgs. 66-7

Although Fort Simpson did have a relatively small farm of about 8 acres-- the majority of which was used for growing potatoes, turnips and cabbage-- there was no prairie or naturally open, arable land in the area which lent itself to agriculture²⁰. The average of 20 men employed at the fort were therefore heavily dependent upon the southern forts and their farms such as Fort Langley as well as upon the local Native populations who traded potatoes, venison and fish for goods like blankets, firearms and ammunition.²¹ Located in a heavily populated region Fort Simpson was traded with an estimated 14,000 indigenous visitors in 1841 alone. For this reason the Fort's primary role was as an "anchor" of the Hudson's Bay Company's fur trading operations on the north coast and it would be one of the few to survive the closing of many coastal forts in the mid-1840s.²²

Fort McLoughlin

Established in 1833 on Heiltsuk territory in Milbanke Sound north of Vancouver Island Fort McLoughlin, like Fort Simpson, was built primarily to undermine American trading activities in the area.²³ As the American trade was completely water-based at the time it was quite successful in this regard and virtually monopolized commerce in the region with, for example, over 5,200 Native traders visiting the Fort in 1841 alone.²⁴

²⁰ Gibson (1985), pg. 62

²¹ Ibid., pg. 62

²² Mackie (1984), pg. 134

²³ Perry (2006), pg. 57

²⁴ Mackie (1984), pg. 134

Also like Fort Simpson, Fort McLoughlin had very poor soil and limited farming potential and was largely unsuccessful even with such hardy crops as potatoes.²⁵ The Fort's 10-15 full time employees therefore similarly relied heavily on supplies from the south and as a result was one of the first forts to close with Simpson's reorganization of the coastal trade in the spring of 1843. Much of the Fort's staff, supplies and infrastructure, including future Chief Factor Roderick Finlayson, were moved to Fort Victoria when it was established that same year.

Fort Nisqually



Fort Nisqually, by Edward Porcher, October 5, 1866, Beinecke Library.

Until the establishment of Fort Nisqually in 1833, Fort Langley was the sole permanent HBC presence in the vast and resource rich region extending from the Straits of Juan de

²⁵ Perry (2006), pg. 57

Fuca east to the Fraser Valley and from Georgia Strait to the southern limits of Puget Sound.²⁶ With the founding of the new fort at the southern tip of that region near present day Tacoma, however, a new centre of trade and commerce for Puget Sound area was created.

Although the site was selected for its proximity to the “Grand Prairie”, which extended for 30 miles east/west and 20 miles north/south along the Nisqually River, it was soon recognized that the soil in the region was shallow, rocky and not very productive agriculturally.²⁷ With the decline of the fur trade in the late 1830s crop farming was still attempted and it was not until the early 1840s, when management of the farms was transferred to the Puget Sound Agricultural Company that livestock farming was increased to beyond subsistence levels. From that point on Nisqually became the centre of livestock farming in the Northwest. By 1846 the Company’s farms covered an area of 140 square miles which was used for grazing some 8000 sheep, 3000 cattle and 300 horses.²⁸

At their prime the farms surrounding Fort Nisqually were producing such excess amounts of animal products that a large proportion of it was being shipped all the way to England, where much of the stock had originated from.²⁹ Wool, hides, tallow and horn were thus disposed of while, beginning in 1843, beef and mutton were sent north to the nascent establishment of Fort Victoria as well as to other locations on the coast. It is also notable that more than half of the labour carried out on Fort Nisqually’s farms

²⁶ Mackie (1997), pg. 234

²⁷ Gibson (1985), pg. 96

²⁸ Mackie (1984), pg. 129

²⁹ Gibson (1985), pg. 97

was done by Native employees who were paid \$5-8 per year.³⁰ This, in comparison to the \$35-40 paid to British employees at the time, is indicative of the profits that were being cut through farming and of the degree of newcomer dependence upon Aboriginal labour in the resettlement of the Pacific Northwest.

Cowlitz Farm

Established in 1837 on a Canadian ex-HBC employee's private farm, the Cowlitz Farm was located 36 miles north of Fort Vancouver on the banks of the Colwlitz River. The site was at the centre of a prairie which extended for approximately 4 miles along either side of that river and comprised about 3000 acres of unforested land.³¹ Unlike Nisqually this was prime agricultural land with the soil consisting of, as James Douglas referred to it, "a fine rich loam with a subsoil of stiff clay".³² According to historian James Gibson, "Cowlitz farm specialized in grain growing" and just as "Nisqually farm was the pastoral arm of the [HBC's farming operations in the Northwest], Cowlitz was the arable arm".³³ Transferred to the PSAC in 1839, over half of the farm's cultivated land was dedicated to wheat growing which produced upwards of 10,000 bushels in 1845. This output supplied almost the entire contract demand (8,400 bushels/year) of the Russian America Company's Alaskan forts for that product.³⁴ The farm's operations were not limited to grains, however. Other crops included peas, potatoes, turnips,

³⁰ Mackie (1997), pg. 296

³¹ Gibson (1985), pg. 92

³² As quoted in Gibson (1985), pg. 92

³³ Ibid., pg. 100

³⁴ Ibid., pg. 100

colewort, flax, clover and timothy grass and, by the mid-1840s, there were also significant numbers of cattle, sheep, horses and hogs.³⁵

Cowlitz farm employed a full-time staff of 24 to 32 men who managed the various jobs around the establishment.³⁶ As Richard Mackie has noted, a significant number of these workers were Native and records show that 11 of the 32 employees in 1843 were of that background.³⁷ At harvest times these numbers swelled by almost 50 percent as Native men and women were hired to help bring in the crops and perform other seasonal tasks. Like the most other forts and farms in the Pacific Northwest, HBC/PSAC operations at Cowlitz were highly dependent upon the Aboriginal populations amongst whom they were established.

Fort Stikine

This northernmost of the Company's coastal forts was built in 1839 near the mouth of the Stikine River under a lease of land from the Russian-America Company who possessed the international rights of trade in the area at the time.³⁸ Of all of the HBC forts on the coast this was the least productive agriculturally as the buildings were erected on a narrow peninsula of land which provided little space for anything else.³⁹ The fort's two dozen employees relied almost entirely on trade with local Tlingit First Nations for their sustenance and by the 1840s it was perceived as being a burden on the Company's finances. It was the first fort to close with the establishment of Fort Victoria

³⁵ Ibid., pg. 93

³⁶ Ibid., pg. 92

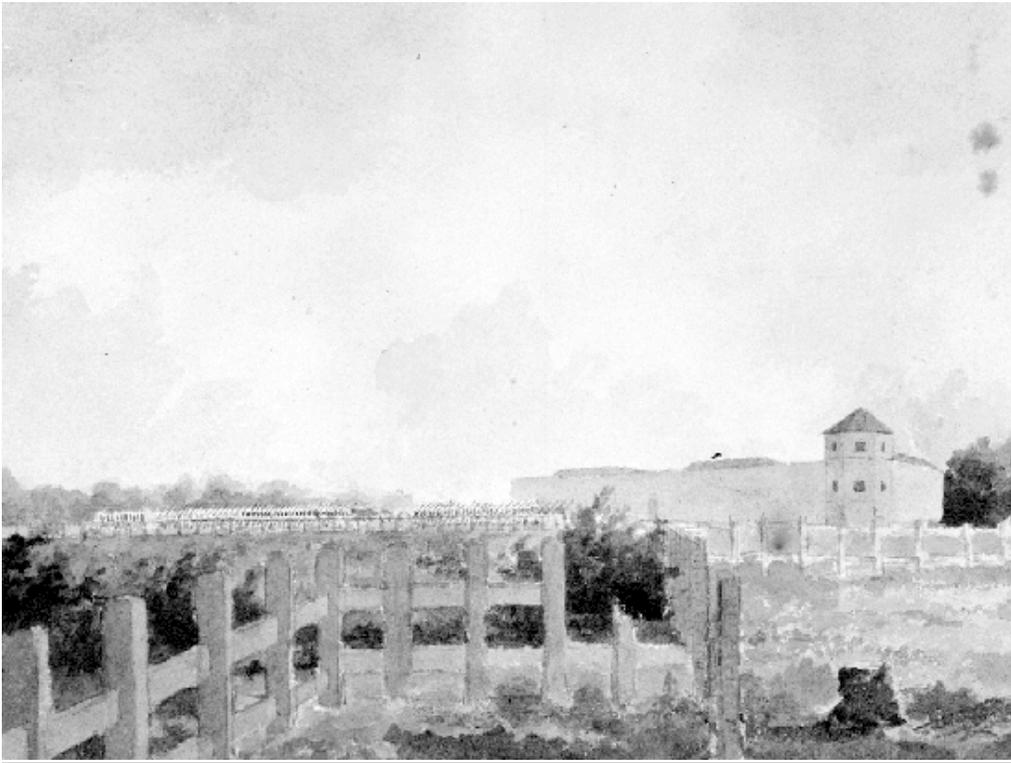
³⁷ Mackie (1997), pg. 297

³⁸ Gibson (1985), pg. 66

³⁹ Ibid.

in 1843 and the consolidation of the Company's northern assets further south at Fort Simpson.⁴⁰

Fort Victoria



"Seamen and Marines of HMS Constance Marching Out of Fort Victoria by John Tunstall Haverfield, 1848, Royal BC Museum- BC Archives PDP01184.

While the primary motivation for the creation of Fort Victoria in 1843 had always been to establish a new centre of operations for the Company in the Pacific Northwest there were many factors contributing to the selection of the site upon which it was ultimately determined to build.⁴¹ One of these was agricultural potential.

⁴⁰ Perry (2006), pg. 95

⁴¹ Mackie (1997), pgs. 257-9

Raised on the edge of a series of broad and rolling prairies that formed part of the traditional territory of the Lekwungen First Nation, Fort Victoria was fast to establish its own farms. As the Journals clearly show, almost everyday some new progress was made in that direction whether it was the building of a new plough, the ploughing of a new field, or the sowing of a new crop. By 1845, Gibson records that the Fort's 20 staff had over 120 acres under cultivation.⁴² The next year, the farm produced more than 800 bushels of wheat, 400 of oats, 300 of peas and 2100 of potatoes on 160 acres of farmland.⁴³ A six acre orchard was also producing apples, pears and peaches that year.

Livestock farming also expanded rapidly as the wild plants and grasses of the area served as excellent cattle pasture. The Fort's holdings of 23 cattle, 7 horses and 1 pig in 1844 had increased to 128 cattle, 40 horses and 6 pigs two years later in 1846 and would continue to grow exponentially after that.⁴⁴ At this rate Fort Victoria was well on its way to becoming the new Hudson's Bay Company centre of operations in the Pacific Northwest.

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⁴² Gibson (1985), pg. 63

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pg. 64

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