

Park - River Lot 4

The Park family was one of the earliest pioneer family in what is now south St Andrews.

The head of the family was John Park who was born in Orkney in 1770. He brought his indigenous wife and children to Red River settlement in the early 1820's after retiring from the HBC. They were some of the first farmers to carve a successful farm out of the wilderness on the banks of the Red.

If the Park family had a coat of arms, a prominent feature would have been a York boat. It was to that cargo-carrying rowboat (13 meters long and 2 1/2 meters wide, equipped with both oars and a sail), that John Park owed his fame and fortune (such as it was), and especially the river lot near to the creek that was eventually named in his family's honour.

York Boat Man

The York boat was the preferred water craft of the HBC. With its large capacity (about 4 times that of a freighter canoe) and small crew (6- 8 men), this vessel became the work horse of the HBC inland operations the late 1700's.

As the company extended its network of trading posts inland from Hudson Bay, it found that a rowboat with its wooden construction made it more durable in traversing rapids and meant that it could outpace the lighter, but fragile canoes of the rival North West Company. The York boat could deliver larger payloads - about 2 1/2 tonnes: it was the semi-trailer of its day. To power



these boats, the HBC needed a reliable, hard-working workforce habituated to rough conditions and small boats. This, they found in Orkney, the island kingdom north of Scotland which was often the last stop (for fresh water and food) for HBC ocean-going ships (on their 2 month trip to Hudson Bay).

Young men like John Park signed contracts for 1, 3 or 5 years.

When John Park first arrived at York Factory as an employee of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1792, he earned £6 per year as a rower on the York boat brigades. Within 5 years, he was recognized as so skilled that he was promoted to steersman at a wage of £24 - a princely sum in that era for Bay employees. (By comparison, officers (clerks, writers, post masters, traders, factors) earned between £20 - £100 plus shares in the profits).

Any member of a York boat's crew had to be strong, agile and courageous. Like the other boatmen, John carried the 90 lb (41 kg) bundles of trade goods and furs around the waterfalls and rapids that were too dangerous to shoot down. He, and his mates, would maneuver the boats around the 37 sets of rapids on the Hayes River, then set the sail to traverse the treacherous waters of Lake Winnipeg.

The brigades used rivers and lakes as highways to deliver trade goods to the outlying HBC trading posts across the prairies and throughout the Northwest Territories. They retrieved the furs acquired at the posts from the indigenous trappers then completed a thousand kilometre journey by returning to either Norway House or York Factory on Hudson Bay. Travelling through largely uncharted wilderness, they lugged their cargoes and the York boats up the shore, then pushed and pulled the vessel along trails as they cut them through the bush.

At times, Park and his comrades would tie lines to the boat and, from the rock-strewn shores, guide the loaded boat up or down the chutes. All the while, he and his crew braved threats from wild animals, biting insects, and hostile enemies (indigenous or rival traders). Whether traversing stormy, ice-clogged lakes or carrying packets across muskeg and leech-filled swamps, it was Park's job to keep his crew's spirits up. This could be done by rhythmic songs, rations of HBC rum, or competitions in skills.

The food that accompanied the brigades was Buffalo pemmican, bannock and tea. A trip man was away from his family for 5-6 months a year. While he was away, his wife and children had to plant garden plots, manage livestock, deal with providing food for themselves and their animals.

As a Steersman, John Park had to do what his crew did, and more, in order to maintain discipline and his leadership. It was the steersman who controlled the craft and watched for and avoided hazards. It was he, who commanded the crew and made the key decisions: when to row, when to set the sail, where to beach and when. It was he, who managed the crew's food supplies, allocated tasks, and chose the route. It was his navigation ability that was crucial to the success of a mission. He also, as one of the crew, leaped into the water to rescue a drowning crewman, a passenger or a " packet" of goods.

The Howse Expedition

In 1809, John Park was chosen to take part in an expedition of discovery through the Rocky Mountains. The leader was Joseph Howse, a rising star in the HBC. Howse was determined to penetrate the Rocky Mountains from the east and extend the HBC trading zone into the Columbia River district. A successful voyage by Howse would also establish a claim for Britain on the western side of the Rocky Mountains. The expedition of 17 men (4 Cree hunters and guides, 13 Baymen in two York boats) set out in June of 1809.

After almost a year of facing incredible dangers, Howse returned to Fort Edmonton. Howse was acclaimed by his bosses for being the first Bayman to compete as an explorer with the famous North West Company adventurers like David Thompson, Alexander Mackenzie and Simon Fraser. The maps that Howse drew enabled the HBC to set up trading posts on the other side of the Rockies to tap into the rich fur forests of central British Columbia.

Howse received the plaudits humbly, but was very complimentary of the other men on his expedition, including John Park. Park, he said, after spending almost a year in the wilderness together, was “the finest steersman in the service” of the HBC. Park went on other expeditions but mainly was used on the seasonal brigades inland to the Saskatchewan country.

Competition for Furs

In the late 1700's , the HBC extended its network of forts inland from the shores of Hudson Bay along the River systems. There, it encountered the posts of its rival, the North West Company based in Montreal. From the beginning of the 19th century, competition between these two fur trading networks intensified. Trading practices became more ruthless as each company tried to cut costs while extracting more furs out of the indigenous people.

Liquor became a dangerous feature of the trade. The pressure of competition caused traders to insert more and more alcohol into the trading process. At both the NWC and the HBC posts, drinks of cheap rum or “brandy” became the standard beginning to a trading session. The fact that the alcohol impaired the judgment of the indigenous traders was an advantage to the companies. Liquor enhanced profits.

The detrimental effects of “ fire water” on the First Nations often led to violence and social break down. The harmful consequences for the Native people were largely ignored. A few principled officers like William(later Captain) Kennedy resigned when the HBC refused to restrict its use of alcohol.

Generally, relations between the employees of the two companies was anything but friendly. The incident, in 1816 at Seven Oaks, causing the deaths of 21 Selkirk settlers was the direct result of the bitter animosity between the North West and the Hudson's Bay Companies. Seven Oaks was the culmination of smaller skirmishes, violence and intimidation that had occurred for a generation. The bloodshed and the ensuing court battles drew the attention of British authorities. The Colonial Office forced the two companies to the bargaining table to bring stability to the fur trade. A merger of the rivals under the HBC name took effect in 1821.

An HBC official, Nicolas Garry, toured the posts of both companies to re-draw the fur trade map. Garry recommended the closure of half of existing trading outlets and the lay off or “retiring” of half the workforce. The retired or “surplussed” workers of all ranks from both companies were offered transport back to their homes in Europe or the Canadas.

The Scottish partners and French-Canadian voyageurs, who had powered the mighty North West Company canoes had connections with Montreal and the Ottawa Valley, were sent back to Lower Canada. While many HBC officers returned as wealthy men to Britain, many low paid workers took passage back to their place of origin where their futures were uncertain.

Farmland in Britain was extremely expensive and beyond the means of these former fur trade labourers. The skills needed in the North American fur trade were not highly valued in Scotland

or England. Low paid labouring jobs were available but would rarely sustain a marriage or creation of a family. Life for many former HBC workers led directly to poverty.

Some were able to return as employees of the company and eventually did take up land in the Northwest (such as Richard Stevens on St Andrews River Lot 100) . Following the merger, some Orkneymen (about 100), French Canadians, Scots and Englishmen brought their families to Red River where Lord Selkirk had begun a settlement in 1811.

St Andrews Pioneers

Instead of accepting the company's offer of transportation back to Orkney without his Cree wife and Métis children, John Park took a grant of land at Red River settlement. Clearly, his wife and children meant so much to him that he was willing to undertake a dramatic life change for their sake. Together, they made the incredible journey, from the shores of Hudson Bay by York boat, to begin a new life as farmers at Red River.

Without him and his sense of loyalty, the family would become one the many destitute families abandoned at posts across the Northwest. The problem of starving abandoned wives with children became so acute at some posts that the chief factors began to plead with the company's directors in London for a solution to this human misery that company policies were creating.

The answer, HBC Governor, George Simpson, came up with was to support the struggling Red River settlement with an infusion of HBC "retirees". This created not only a new skill base from which the Selkirk colonists could draw, but also a market for locally-produced goods and food.

Simpson foresaw the day when the offspring of these former Bay men would become labourers and trip men for the HBC. He also hoped that the farmers of Red River would eventually produce enough food products to supply all of the HBC trading posts in Rupertsland. This would reduce the amount of food imported from Britain and reduce costs for the HBC.

Simpson began giving (and selling) grants of land to retirees who would settle with their indigenous families at Red River. The grants even became a part of contracts signed by new employees. Upon satisfactory completion of their contracts, workers who chose to remain in the Northwest could receive 25, 50 or even 100 acres of land along the Red River. Possession of that much land in Britain was an impossibility for most labourers, so the promise of a grant was, for many, an irresistible enticement to sign on with the Company even at low wages.

Often, the higher one rose in the company, the larger was the grant. One could also say that the closer friends one was with George Simpson, the more likely a larger river lot would be given. Prices and rents often varied with the regard Simpson accorded the buyer. For Reverend Cockran, who purchased two large lots on behalf of the Church of England, Simpson charged several shillings per acre: for a friend, Simpson levied an annual fee of 5 peppercorns (essentially, a good dinner together once a year).

John Park , having served the HBC as a boatman for almost 30 years, was given a grant of land along the Red River north of a creek flowing from a huge marsh known as the Big Bog (and later as the St Andrews Marsh). The narrow lot had about 100 metres frontage on the river and was about 2 miles deep enclosing 92 acres. The land was fertile and had plenty of trees near the river bank for fuel and building material. It also had open prairie for field crops and access to hay for his livestock in the nearby marsh.

At the time of his “retirement” in the early 1820’s, John Park was already over 50 years old. He was one of 45 Orkneymen who brought their indigenous families to the St Andrews area. After a life of hard labour on the York boat brigades, he was rugged and still ambitious. He wanted to create a working farm to provide a safe living for his dependents. Park and his Cree wife , Margaret, and their children set to the tasks of uprooting trees, ploughing virgin prairie and sowing crops.

A first farmer

For fur traders with indigenous wives and offspring, the act of taking up the plough after a lifetime at the oar was tremendously difficult. In Rupertsland, the domain of the HBC, there were no other choices that would allow them to stay together and still feed themselves. For 30 years, Park had explored the wilderness, encountering and conquering dangers of every sort. Taking up a piece of prairie and creating a productive farm in Manitoba’s climate was a whole new challenge!



(A painting of early Manitoba life by William Hind shows the labour needed to obtain one log)

In that era, it took an acre of farm land per person for basic survival. To obtain an acre of productive farmland required clearing the land of rocks, trees and stumps, ploughing and seeding crops in time to take advantage of the spring moisture and the dry summer heat. It also required controlling weeds and pests, harvesting with a sickle or scythe, and winnowing

and milling the grain. As well, one had to tend to needs of the livestock, gathering and storing hay for winter, caring for animals and building shelters.

On a frontier farm, every member of the family had to work to get all the jobs done. Children, who had grown up in or near far flung trading posts, had to adjust to the lack of personal freedom. They had to do tasks that modern children can't imagine. Imagine weeding a whole field on a daily basis by hand, or picking potato beetles and other insects off individual plants, or beating down and killing hordes of grasshoppers as they landed and devoured every green thing in the field. The typical jobs for young people included fetching pails of water from a creek or river and emptying chamber pots. There was no time or money for schooling. At that time, there were no schools. No teachers except one's parents (if they could read and write)! Nor were there doctors, hospitals or stores.

It was miles to the nearest trading post at Lower Fort Garry and when you got there, you had to have something to trade for the things you wanted or needed. The prices were always too high. Girls could earn money by selling their needlework, or perhaps eggs or butter. Boys could cut wood, catch fish, trap muskrats or beavers, dry and stretch their skins and take them to the traders. Working the fields with a father or uncle was the fate of many 12-14 year olds. At 16, boys could often obtain work as a labourer at either Upper or Lower Fort Garry. By 18, a young man was strong enough to become a trip man, like his father or his neighbours.

Young men could, as contract workers for the HBC, be sent to postings anywhere, from Labrador to the Mackenzie River. Girls, from a very young age, were married off. Records show that families were large and that the death rate among infants and birthing mothers was very high. Almost every family lost at least one child to childbirth, fires, diseases and accidents. One of the missionary's strongest arguments for baptisms was that if a baptized child died, it would surely go directly into heaven. Grieving families were fertile ground for the priest's words of hope. Religion was a very important part of life and death in the Red River settlements.

Despite all of the dangers and challenges, this industrious family achieved amazing progress! By 1827, according to the census, the Parks had a house, a barn, 4 horses, 8 cows, 5 hogs and 3 oxen. The Parks also owned a plough and 2 harrows as well as a canoe and 3 carts. They already had 8 acres under cultivation - enough crop land to provide for his family and produce a small surplus that he could use to buy supplies at Lower Fort Garry.

Park was successful in his transition from a low-paid voyageur to an enterprising farmer. Though this shift in livelihood was not easy, John's success was a model to other HBC employees who had retired to the St Andrews area (see Gibson, Truthwaite, Lambert, Linklater, McDonald).

It was the families of these working class labourers who built the churches, established farmsteads, and created the first roadways. These Métis families formed the core of St Andrews society, until retired officers of the HBC began to settle in the area in the 1850's. The margins of their river lot farms make up the road pattern of St Andrews today!

John Park's family maintained that farm for many years. John was, as his employer had remarked in his career with the HBC " a strong man" and lived to the age of 77. By that time, there must have been several households living on the property. John, his sons Thomas and James and their large families. His sons hired on as HBC labourers and earned extra money carting goods between the Upper and Lower Forts Garry.

John's oldest son, Thomas, inherited Lot 4 when his father died in 1847. Thomas was the registered owner in 1870. As with many of the early families, daughters and sons found

spouses nearby. Thomas's eldest daughter, Margaret, married John Irvine who lived at Lot 5. Like most other couples in the region, they were married, likely by Reverend Cockran, at the Rapids Church (later, St Andrews). When John Irvine died Margaret Park became the registered owner of Lot 5. The farm on Lot 4 had passed, by that time, to James, John's younger son, in 1875.

James Park was one of the volunteers who joined Dr Schultz's "army of St Andrews", in February of 1870, to march against Louis Riel. Dr John Christian Schultz was the leader of two counter-rebellions against Riel and his Provisional government.

According to Schultz, Riel was a "traitor" for resisting Canada's takeover of Rupertsland. Schultz hoped to advance his political career by starting a civil war between the French and English Métis of Red River. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and the "army" of 300 disbanded before it could engage with Riel's forces. Peace was restored once Schultz fled to the United States. He was guided through the wilderness to Duluth, Minnesota on snowshoes by Joe Monkman, an Anglo-Métis from St Andrews.

(For more information on the Riel Resistance consult: George Stanley's great biography "Louis Riel", Ryerson Press, 1972)

James Park married Margaret Inkster, part of the famous Inkster family of Kildonan. Both Thomas' and James' children married into other St Andrews settler families: Masseys, Fidlers, Harcuses, and McDonalds. The descendants of John Park, the Orkney boatman, became pioneers of new farming areas such as Cloverdale, Clandeboye, Petersfield and Selkirk. Their legacy is the modern Manitoba of today.

Eventually, the creek near which the farm was situated, (though it was also the site of the Tait family's Water mill), became known as Parks Creek. The area took the name "Parkdale" and was the site of a school and a church (St Stephen's) that future Premier, John Norquay, attended.

For information about the Park family and others look up redriverancestry.ca, an amazingly complete site assembled by the late genealogist, Gary Still.