

River Lot 59 - The Sinclair Family

Sinclair was one of the most prominent early family names on River Road in 1870, These are the listed owners of River Lots in St Andrews, (others are now listed for St Clements, Kildonan St Paul and St Peter's)

Lot 132 and 133 - Duncan Sinclair

Lot 91 - Baikie Sinclair

Lot 59 - Thomas Sinclair

Lot 25 - George Sinclair

Lot 14 - Peter Sinclair

Most Sinclairs in St Andrews are directly related to Orkneyman, William Sinclair, the Chief Factor at York Factory and his Cree Wife, Nahoway and their 12 children.

The Sinclairs' offspring, grandchildren, cousins and relatives have held lots and homesteads along the Red River for more than 180 years. This Orkney clan occupies a prestigious place in the development of the region and the West!

William had a long history with the HBC. In 1782, he was hired as a boy to act as a servant to Humphrey Marten the newly appointed governor of York Factory. On his way to Hudson Bay, his ship was captured by a French pirate. He was rescued and taken back to Orkney aboard a British warship, the Severn.

This was only the first of many extraordinary adventures for William. Later in life, he blew off his left hand when his flintlock exploded while hunting. He was also blinded for a time, He also suffered a recurring illness referred to as "dropsy". Through it all, he displayed remarkable courage, endurance and talent.

The luckiest move in his long career as a fur trader was his marriage "a la facon du pays" to Nahoway, a Cree woman with great entrepreneurial skill. Through his "country wife", William achieved notable success by connecting himself to Cree traders and trappers. He learned the indigenous languages and quickly worked his way up from ordinary boatman to trader to Chief Factor.

William and Nahoway had a large family that prospered due to William's influence within the HBC and his fluency in Native languages, Orcadian, English and French. Most of his children married well and used their abilities to make the Sinclair name one of the most highly regarded in the Northwest.

Eldest daughter, Phoebe (1792-1848), married HBC surgeon, Thomas Bunn and became the mother of Thomas Bunn, jr. who assisted Louis Riel in writing the Bill of Rights that became the basis for the Manitoba Act that brought Manitoba into Confederation in 1870.

Another of William and Nahoway's daughters, Catherine (1798 - 1881), married Joseph Cook, the instructor that Reverend Cochran hired to assist Peguis and his band to learn farming techniques at St Peters. The creek near where they lived is still called Cook's Creek in East Selkirk.

One son, Thomas (1810-1870), married the most beautiful girl in Red River, according to legend, Caroline Pruden. He operated a grist mill on Lot 59. His family ground the grains that his relatives and neighbours grew. His mill produced flour that sustained the Red River colony and was purchased and then exported by the HBC to their posts across the Northwest. Thomas and Caroline's son, Thomas Sinclair jr., became a Member of Manitoba's Legislature and the mayor of Selkirk (1887).



It was another of William's sons, James, (1806-1856) who as a fur trader for the HBC became so acquainted with the passes in the Rocky Mountains, that George Simpson asked him to lead an expedition of Red River families to settle the



Columbia River Valley. Simpson's goal was to establish a British colony in Oregon to forestall a U S takeover of the West Coast.

James Sinclair's mission was successful. However, later wrangling between Britain and the U S resulted in the land he claimed being traded away (in exchange for peace between the two nations) in the Oregon Boundary Dispute of 1848. The dissolution of Sinclair's colony eventually led to the founding of Fort Victoria, Vancouver and the birth of "British" Columbia.

One rather tragic and significant note that has been dwelt upon in several histories of the fur trade era was the treatment of one of William's daughters by George Simpson, the Governor of the HBC. Elizabeth Sinclair ("Betsy") (1805-1878) was in a marriage " a la facon du pays" with Simpson until he returned to England in 1830 and married his cousin, Frances. Before his arrival back in Red River, he wrote to a friend to have him move Betsy out of the area and set her up with a new husband (Robert Seaborn Miles (1795-1870)).

When Sir George ensconced himself and his 19 year old bride at the Big House in Lower Fort Garry, he thought, she would be safe from the gossip about his earlier dalliances and relationships. It was Frances' growing awareness of her "gallant" husband's past and the common knowledge of it that likely led to her leaving Red River. Pleading illness, she returned to England for a decade before eventually returning to settle with Simpson in Lachine Quebec.

The Simpsons' domestic situation led to a change in the history of Lower Fort Garry. When the Simpsons left, Lower Fort Garry went from being the administrative headquarters of the HBC in the Northwest to becoming only a Depot. Action shifted to reconstructing the flood ravaged Upper Fort Garry, at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, and making it the most important HBC post in the West. Upper Fort Garry later played an important role in the Riel Resistance, the creation of the province of Manitoba and the beginnings of the City of Winnipeg.

The Sinclair family and their relations have spread across the continent. They have contributed to their communities in times of war and peace. Currently, the most prominent member of the vast Sinclair clan is Judge Murray Sinclair. It is estimated that William and Nahoway have 5000 relations alive today in North America.

For more information about the early Sinclair family and its descendants check out (redriverancestry.ca) and the Manitoba Historical Society website (MHS.mb.ca). For a wonderful read, try Donna Sutherland's exploration of her connection to her ancestor, in the book " Nahoway".

These pictures are paintings done by William Hime brother of H L Hime who explored The West in the 1860's. The paintings date from 1870-71 when William actually lived in Red River.