

York Factory – National Historic Site of Canada Kichewaskahikun (Cree) (“The Great House”)

Nearly four thousand years before the first Europeans arrived in North America, the Hudson Bay area was home to successive waves of Aboriginal peoples such as the Predorset; Dorset; Thule; Cree; Dene; and Inuit people. After the last ice age, both the glaciers and the Tyrell Sea retreated, leaving the rebounding newly exposed land available to plant and wildlife colonization. Aboriginal people traveled into the area and different groups made use of seasonal cycles of game, fish and berries. These people led a nomadic existence, harvesting ringed seals in Hudson Bay, and caribou inland.

European explorers came seeking the Northwest Passage, believed to be a path to the spice-rich Orient. Instead, they found a wealth that rivaled the Far East. The Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), formed in 1717 to take advantage of this wealth, and the subsequent fur trade, changed the face of North America.

The remnants of the Hudson’s Bay Company settlement at York Factory are now threatened with the effects of climate change and a receding shoreline.

The Hudson’s Bay Company

The Hudson Bay Charter was established on May 6, 1670 when King Charles II of England granted all the lands drained by waters flowing into the Hudson Bay to the “Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson’s Bay,” thus creating the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC).

The economic fortunes of the day were in furs and trading involved cooperation, assistance and partnership between the “old inhabitants”, of the land, the Métis, First Nations and non-native people. This trade prospered for over 200 years.

As the HBC expanded its operations, trading posts were established on Hudson Bay and inland in places such as York Factory, Fort Severn, Norway House and Cumberland House.

York Factory became the gateway between Europe and all of western and northern Canada for the HBC, and now is renowned as the most significant HBC historic site in North America.

York Factory

Three centuries of history are commemorated on the shore of Hudson Bay. York Factory is significant for its critical role in the French-English struggle on Hudson Bay for control of the fur trade, as an important HBC trading post and entrepôt,¹ and for its role in the expansion of the fur trade into the interior of western Canada. As the longest operated HBC post in North America, York Factory is of national significance because of the importance of the fur trade in Canadian history, the international dimensions of the trade and the interaction of aboriginal peoples and their trading partners.

York Factory is located near the mouth of the Hayes River approximately 250 kilometres southeast of Churchill, Manitoba. Its location on the Hayes River near Hudson Bay, and with access to



Historic image of York Factory with its complex of associated buildings and structures, circa 1925 (Library and Archives Canada, PA-041571)

the Nelson River, was a deliberate choice on the part of the HBC. This location was accessible by ocean-going vessels, which would anchor at Five Fathom Hole, and provided safe harbour. From here, goods were transferred to York Factory and smaller boats for inland trade via navigable rivers.

As early as 1670 an attempt was made by the Company to establish a post at the mouth of the Nelson River, but fierce winds hindered landing and the crew sailed back to England. By 1682, however, three groups of traders from New England, England and France had established a series of fur-trading forts in the area of the Hayes and Nelson rivers to compete for control of the territory and fur trade of western Hudson Bay. In 1684, the HBC built York Fort on the north shore of the Hayes River, eight kilometres upstream from the Bay.

Between 1694 and 1697, the French and English battled for control of the original York Factory. Under the command of Pierre Le Moynes d’Iberville, the French captured York Factory in 1694, lost it to the English in 1696, recaptured it the following year, and renamed it Fort Bourbon. It remained under French control until the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, which awarded HBC exclusive trading rights on Hudson Bay. York Factory quickly

York Factory, 2005 (Heartland Tours, Manitoba)





Aerial view of York Factory and the bank of the Hayes River, 2005 (Heartland Tours, Manitoba)

became the Company's single most important trading post on the Bay, although its monopoly was successfully challenged by traders from New France who had established a series of posts far to the south in the Lake Superior and Lake Winnipeg regions.

Despite diminishing fur returns, the HBC made no serious attempt to construct any inland posts or to challenge its competitors from New France. With the fall of Quebec in 1760, new merchants — largely Scottish and Métis traders who later formed the North West Company — assumed control of the Montréal-based fur trade and succeeded in capturing much of the trade of the Aboriginal peoples who had traditionally made the long journey to York Factory to exchange pelts for European guns, kettles, knives and blankets.

In order to meet its competitors head-on, the HBC abandoned its sleep by the frozen sea, and in 1774, with the building of Cumberland House in northeastern Saskatchewan, the Company began the construction of a series of inland posts.

York Factory played an important role from the 1680s until approximately 1850, first as a major trading post and then as the main Hudson's Bay Company entrepôt providing the vital link between the vast fur resources of the interior of the continent and the markets of Europe. In 1810, it became the headquarters for the Hudson's Bay Company's newly established Northern Department. Aside from administrative and financial functions, York Factory also served as the entry point for most Europeans bound for Rupert's Land. York Factory, particularly as headquarters for the Northern Department after 1810, represents the HBC's role as an imperial factor in British North America.

Over the next century, York Factory changed from a fur-trade post to a warehousing and transshipment depot with considerable administrative responsibilities. As headquarters of the Company's vast Northern Department, York Factory, at its peak in the mid 19th century boasted over fifty buildings and a large complement of officers, clerks, tradesmen and labourers, as well as a seasonal workforce of Native traders and hunters. It was the political, economic and social hub of western Canada fur trade society. At the same time, York Factory was a vibrant community, home to many Cree people of western Hudson Bay. From their initial position as middlemen and traders of commodities, the role of the Home

Guard Cree after 1820 gave way to a market function based principally upon the sale of their labour. The immediate area around the Factory was inhabited by the Cree who trapped, hunted and fished for the Company. A native community was situated one kilometre downstream of the fort. There were also communities scattered throughout the immediate vicinity of York Factory, for example, Ten Shilling Creek, Crooked Bank, and Kaskattamogan just to name a few. To this day, their descendents consider York Factory their homeland.

After 1850, the post diminished in importance and was abandoned by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1957. Ownership was transferred to the Government of Canada in 1968. York Factory was commemorated as a national historic site of Canada in 1936.

The design of York Factory was both simple and utilitarian and typical of what the Hudson's Bay Company regarded appropriate for its posts.

The buildings of the fort were originally laid out in an "H" shape with the depot building or "Great House" (known in the Cree language as "Kichewaskahikun"), the guest-house, and a summer mess house forming the centre bar. The wings of the "H" were composed of fur stores, provision shops, trading rooms, officers' and servants' quarters. The formality of this scheme was reinforced by the main gate in the encircling wooden palisade being directly in line with the entrance to the depot.

Other structures within the palisades included a doctor's house, Anglican church, clergyman's residence, school, hospital, photographic room, library, cooperage, blacksmith shop, bake house, middlemen's dwelling, and net house. Outside of the formality of this public area of the fort, the inter-relationship of the other structures further from the river, such as the manufacturing shops and dwellings, was not based on as rigid a plan. Subsidiary buildings were arranged around a network of boardwalks much like the streets of a small town. The boardwalk system in place today replicates the historical circulation patterns and, in combination with the vestigial remains of an extensive system of drainage ditches, provides evocative echoes of the historic landscape.

Today, the site includes the "Great House" (depot), archaeological remains of more than seventy buildings and large features, more than 3,000,000 artefacts, and the cemetery.

York Factory is threatened

Canada's most important fur trade heritage site is in trouble. Dramatic and ongoing erosion of the Hayes riverbank has substantially reduced the distance between the river and the heart of York Factory. Erosion of the north bank of the Hayes River has meant that the remains of two earlier York Factories have completely disappeared. It is estimated that the present site, which dates from 1788, will be largely lost within 100 to 150 years. The rate of erosion is about 3 metres/5 years. Artefacts and archaeological features are eroding away and, in time, the "Great House" will be affected. Engineering alternatives to stop or drastically slow down erosion are being looked into, but may not be feasible. Documenting and some recovery of the site before it is lost may be the only viable choice.

York Factory is just within the southern edge of permafrost in Canada. Permafrost temperature monitoring in the region since 1993 indicates rises of up to 2°C (Lemke 2007 p370). On this regional scale, increases in the thickness of the active layer (the upper layer that is subject to freeze-thaw cycles) and the northern retreat of permafrost is expected to continue. As explained by Lemke et al (2007 p369) 'Thawing of ice rich permafrost can lead to subsidence of the ground surface as masses of ground ice melt[,] and to the formation of uneven topography known as thermokarst, generating dramatic changes in ecosystems, landscape and infrastructure performance.'

While climate is an important factor determining the distribution of frozen ground, local factors are also important, such as vegetation conditions, snow cover, physical and thermal properties of soils and soil moisture conditions. Permafrost and drainage are interrelated threats. The York Factory site faces permafrost instabil-

ity from combined effects of warming, increased water drainage, and loose soils. Parks Canada, with great concern for York Factory, has begun monitoring of the area. Systematic permafrost monitoring is being explored that would contribute to planning the salvaging and documenting needs for the site, as well as contribute to regional permafrost studies. Experts in areas of geotechnical engineering, permafrost and cold climate heritage management are assisting in research and planning and developing a management strategy that gives direction for the protection and presentation of York Factory.

We hope the rest of the ICOMOS scientific community will continue to follow, with interest, the plans for this exceptional Canadian site.

References

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¹ Entrepôt is defined as an intermediary centre of trade and transhipment.