



The 'Old House' at Albany

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IN THE SUMMER OF 1674, Charles Bayly, Governor of the Hudson's Bay post at Rupert River in James Bay, visited the mouth of the Albany River. This was an historic occasion, for it marked the beginning of a trade that is still going on. Today—291 years after Bayly's first visit—the Indians still bring their furs to the post at Albany. This trade, also, has been continuous, a record which no other settlement in Ontario can match.

Although the "made beaver," the traditional currency of the fur-trade, has been replaced by dollars and cents, the language of trade is still Cree. And the descendants of the trappers who met Bayly in 1674 still spend their winters on the trap-line, and are still fortified by bannock and tea.

This is a land of contrasts, a peculiar yet charming mixture of the old and the new. On one occasion, near the mouth of the river, I passed an ancient Indian woman who was slowly paddling her canoe towards an isolated tent on the south shore. Seated in the bow of the boat was a small child, probably her granddaughter, listening to a transistor radio! The northward push of civilization

is manifest, too, in the gigantic saucers of a radar site; in the thoroughly modern establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company which Mike Pasco operates; and most impressive—at least to me—in the new and tastefully decorated hospital. Here, Sister Ste Colombe guards the health of several hundred children at the mission school, as well as that of stray pilots and archaeologists.

But the historic past, the fur-trade period, is still a very real part of the atmosphere. The visitor senses this immediately. Furs, of course, are an important part of the modern economy at Albany, as they are throughout the entire north. Yet here is an unbroken tradition stretching back to the time when Europeans were still looking for the northwest passage. Here, too, one is struck by the actual physical records of that past—an abandoned building of massive squared timbers sitting in majestic desolation on Albany Island; an ancient cannon still crouched on the bank of the river that it has been brooding over for almost 300 years; a cannon-ball, part of a flint-lock musket, or the bowl of a kaolin pipe that is found on the beach at low tide.

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OUTFIT 296

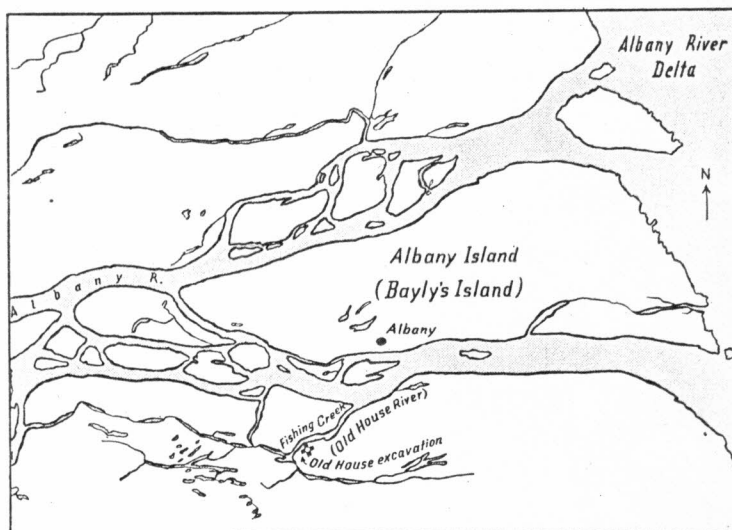
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It was these relics of the fur-trade period that first brought me to Albany. Stories about an old abandoned fort, together with a few gun-flints, old tools and weapons filtered down to the Royal Ontario Museum several years ago. In 1960, the author led a small field-party to Albany to investigate these reports and to assess the possibilities of further work in the area. (A brief account was published in *The Beaver*, Summer 1961.) Since then, three more expeditions have dug at the same spot, the last ending in mid-September of 1964.

The old fort which we excavated is located on the south bank of Fishing Creek, directly opposite the dock for the Radar Base on Anderson Island. When first visited, the outlines of the moat were clearly visible, and concentrations of brick were noted in two different areas. A few small holes were dug through the rubble at randomly scattered spots, and the results of this testing were excellent. We quickly determined that the fort was constructed of squared timbers, laid horizontally. And their state of preservation suggested that excavation might disclose a complete ground-plan of the establishment. Of great importance, also, was the fact that our preliminary digging turned up a large number of items that had been discarded or lost by the inhabitants of the fort.

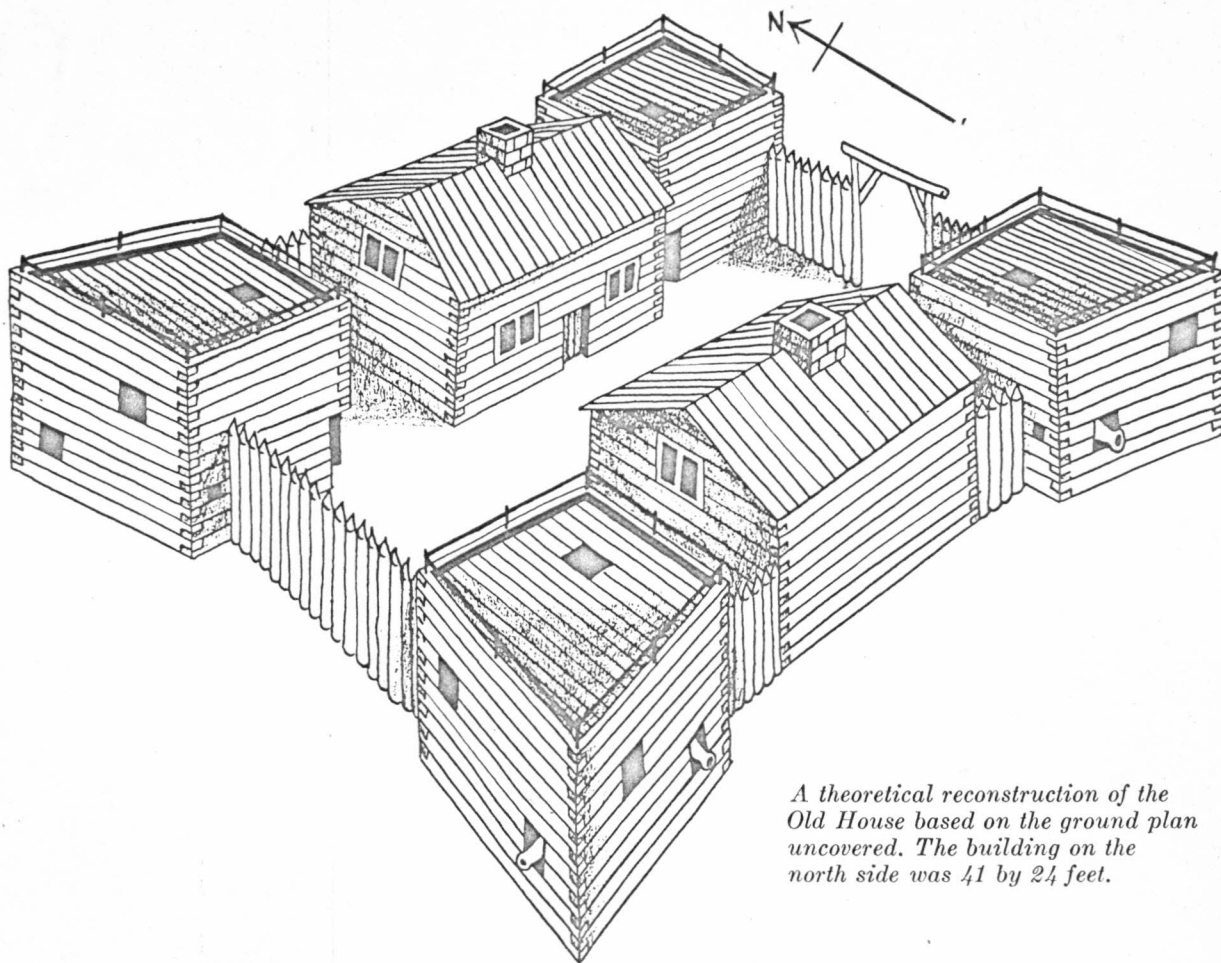
On the basis of these findings, it was decided that the entire fort should be excavated. Our objectives were: first, to find out who had built the fort and, if possible, its period of occupation; second, to locate and map the foundations of the establishment; and third, to collect a large sample of the items that were in day-to-day use at the fort. The latter items—artifacts and food refuse—are particularly important to the archaeologist because they enable him not only to reconstruct the life of the period, but also to interpret that life to the general public through museum displays and illustrated lectures.

A brief and very incomplete examination of the literature on the subject, based almost entirely on *Hudson's Bay Company*, by E. E. Rich, and the *Journal* of de Troyes, edited by Caron, suggests the following sequence of events at Albany. Charles Bayly first visited the mouth of the river in 1674, promising to return the following year. When he left the Bay in 1679, he reported that he had already built a post of some strength on Bayly's Island (this is the present Albany Island). Therefore the original post, which until 1683 was called Chichewan River, was built on Albany Island between 1675 and 1679. Because this post was difficult of access, a new and presumably better location was chosen on the south bank of the river. The date of the move is not recorded; we know, simply, that the new fort was situated there in 1684. It remained there, apparently, till 1720 or 1721.



Clearing the southeast bastion of the Albany site (which is shown opposite) and, bottom, the fireplace and possibly an oven in this bastion.





A theoretical reconstruction of the Old House based on the ground plan uncovered. The building on the north side was 41 by 24 feet.

when it, in turn, was abandoned, and a post was again built on Albany Island.

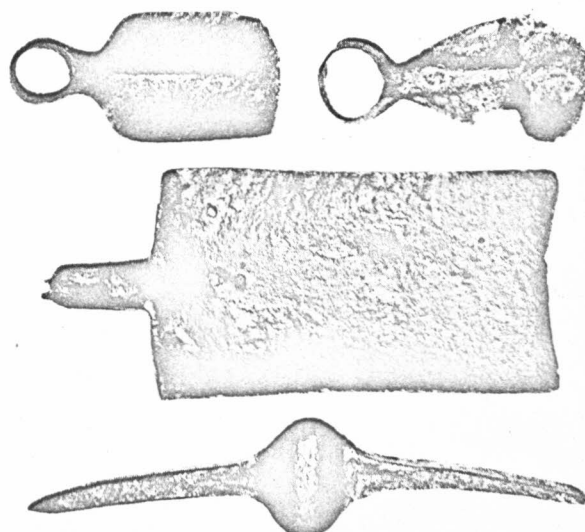
In spite of the fact that the location on the south shore was occupied only for some 36 to 42 years, it had a colourful history. In addition to the usual hardships associated with life at a northern outpost, where communications and supplies were both extremely unreliable, the fort was attacked and captured by de Troyes in the summer of 1686. Seven years later, it was recaptured by James Knight; in 1709, the French again attacked, but on this occasion were successfully driven off. From 1709 to the present, the Hudson's Bay Company has been operating continuously at the mouth of the Albany. And if we include the brief period of French trade there, then the establishment at Albany is at least 286 years old.

The early post on the south shore, however, gradually disappeared. Walls and chimneys crumbled, and the forest of white spruce slowly but steadily obliterated the small clearing which the traders had hewn out of the wilderness. The exact location of the early post was finally forgotten, except, perhaps, for the succession of traders who preserved this information verbally, and for the native Cree who still refer to Fishing Creek, the short channel between Anderson Island and the south bank, as "Old House River."

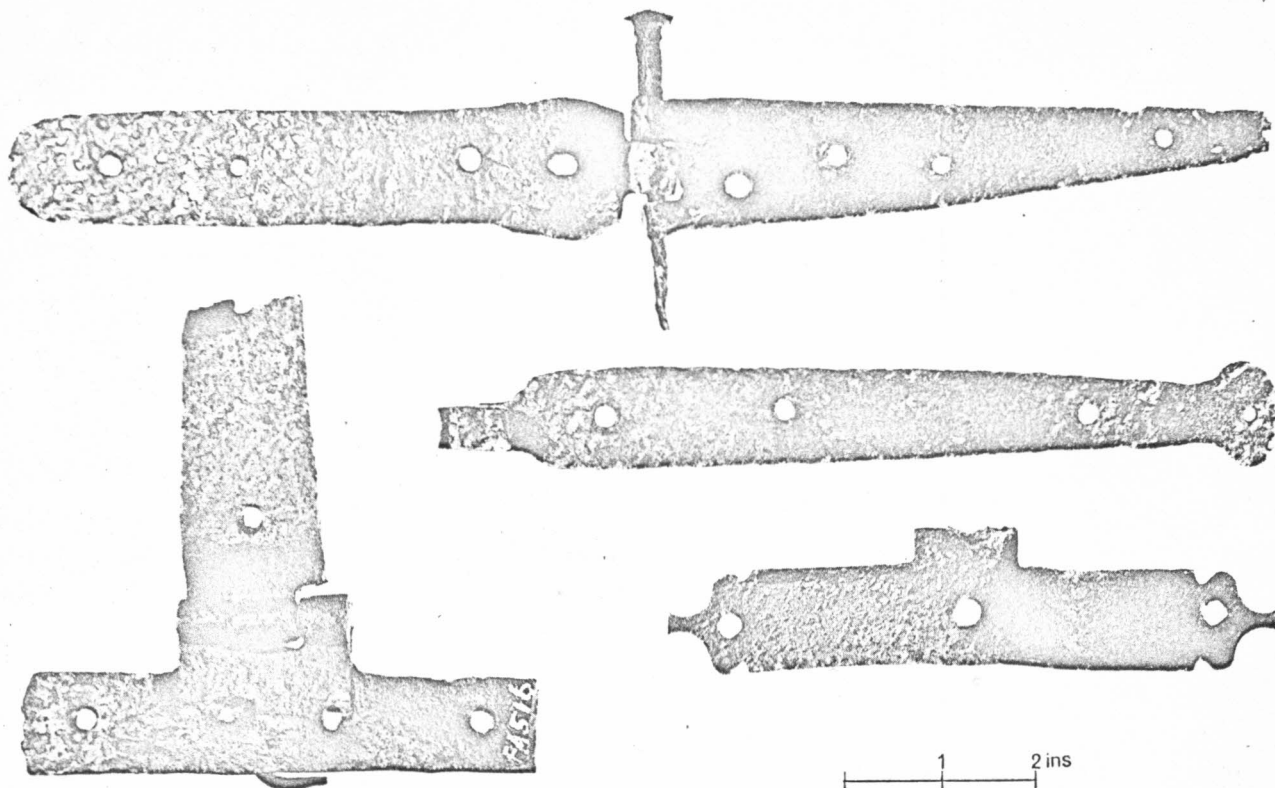
The excavation of the Old House continued through four field seasons, beginning in 1960. Although the job is

not completed, we have amassed a sufficient body of data to justify a preliminary report. In other words, we have answered the basic questions which led us to Fort Albany. We have collected, cleaned, and catalogued 5,741 specimens from the site, and have mapped the buildings and fortifications as they existed when the site was abandoned about 1720.

The excavation procedure was relatively simple. We cut down all the trees—mainly white spruce—inside of the area defined by the outer slope of the moat, then removed the layer of decaying vegetable matter that had



Implements from the fort site.

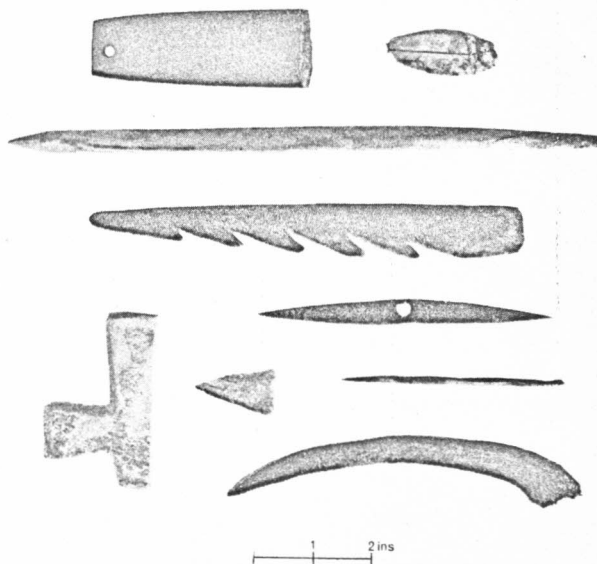


Hinges dug up during excavation.

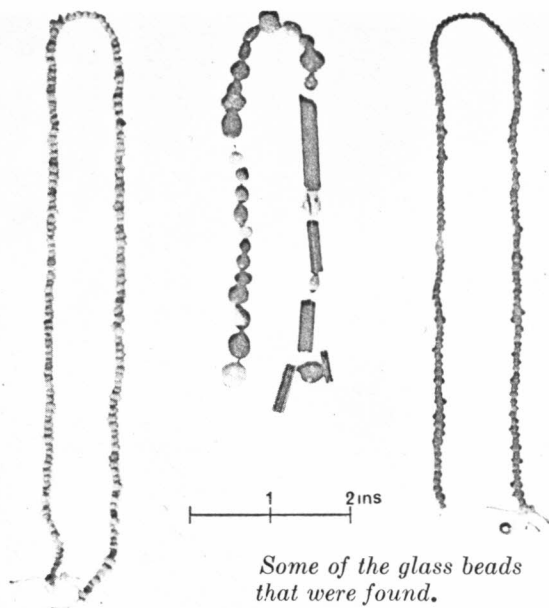
accumulated over the centuries. As we approached the final occupation level, that is, the ground on which the inhabitants of the fort actually walked, we laid aside our shovels, and resorted to small mason's trowels for the final and most exacting work.

Because the fort was constructed of logs, the accumulation of decaying wood-fibres was both thick and compacted, particularly in the lower levels. Fortunately for us, the builders of the fort had banked up clay against the outer walls of the buildings. As the buildings disintegrated, this banked clay tended to slump over the bottom logs, and thus preserve them. With careful trowelling, we were able to locate and follow most of the walls throughout their entire length. We were aided, too, by the fact that the builders had used long, hand-wrought spikes to pin together the mortise-and-tenon joints at the corners of the buildings. The accompanying ground plan of the fort was actually drawn by connecting these corner-pins.

The fort was a well-designed structure consisting of four flankers or bastions, connected on the east and west sides by curtain-walls of upright poles. The north and south perimeters consisted mainly of the outer walls of two large buildings; these were linked to the flankers by short curtains. The entire fort measured only 100 feet wide by 85 feet deep, and because of its shape, every inch of its outer walls could be covered by musket-fire from within.



Indian artifacts were among the relics recovered.

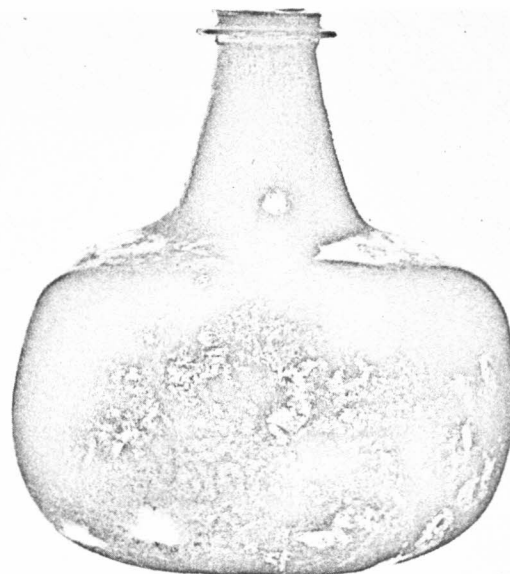


Some of the glass beads that were found.

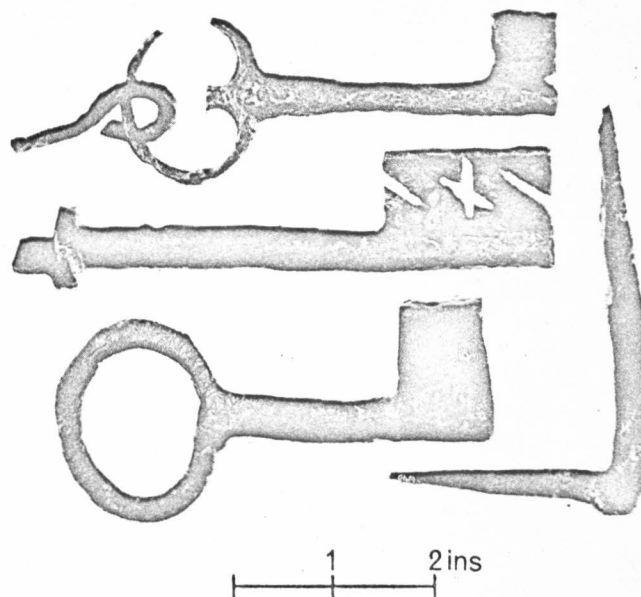
In the centre of each of the houses was a large fireplace, facing east, and in the east half of each house was a basement. A single door gave access to each of the houses from the central courtyard. The fort itself was entered through a wide gate in the centre of the east curtain. In all probability, this was protected by a draw-bridge, but the small trench we dug through the moat outside the gate failed to turn up any evidence of such a structure.

We are much less certain of the appearance of the superstructure of the fort; although the accompanying sketch is probably a fairly good approximation, further historical research may modify many of the details.

Although a discussion of the artifacts found during the excavation must await a final report, a few comments might be appropriate here. Of primary importance is the fact that preliminary study places all of the specimens within the period that we have assigned to the fort—1679 to 1721. That is, the pipes, bottles, beads, and so on, all appear to date from that period when they are compared with similar specimens of known date. Similarly, the few objects that we found with a date of manufacture stamped on them were again consistent with the dates derived from an examination of the historic records. The most recent date, 1707, was stamped on the bottom of the handle of a pewter porringer. ♦



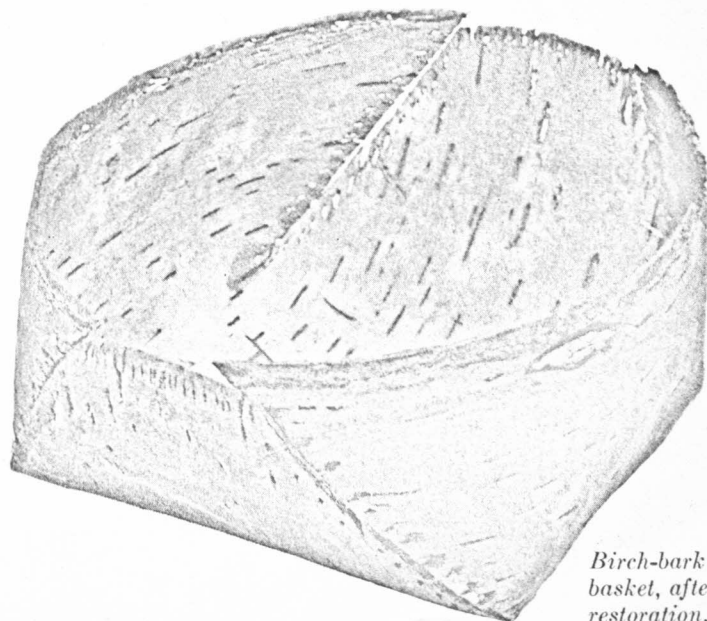
A wine or brandy bottle, 6¾ inches high.



A few of the assorted keys and hooks dug up.



Measuring bird bones from the Albany dig.



Birch-bark basket, after restoration.