

History and Archaeology of the Historic Site of La Loche House

by

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PREFACE

The site of the Northwest Company's La Loche House was located by the writer in 1971 during an archaeological survey in the vicinity of Methy Portage, Saskatchewan. At the time of discovery, no documentation had come to light as to the presence of a fur trading establishment in the locality. The post was tentatively designated a Free Traders' post of the late eighteenth century. However, in the spring of 1972 after extensive examination of the Hudson's Bay Company records in Ottawa, the writer found certain short excerpts relating to the post. The information, though limited, sufficed to date the time of occupation to ca. 1789 - 91 and identified the post as belonging to the Northwest Company. Archaeological excavations have supported this information.

The name, La Loche House, has been given to the site by the writer as no name has been assigned to the post as far as the fur trade literature is concerned. It is felt by the author that additional information regarding the post very likely does not exist; however, the information presently available has somewhat been supplemented by certain ethnographic data.

Though the post appears to be insignificant in relation to the overall fur trade activity, especially because it was short-lived, it has much to offer archaeologically. The archaeological investigations have revealed much about early building construction, historic trade goods and initial native-white contact activities in the boreal forest regions. Until the present Methy Portage archaeological investigations took place, no extensive Historic Sites archaeology had been carried out in the northern forest regions of Saskatchewan.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The field research accomplished at the site of La Loche House was only made possible through the cooperation of a number of institutions and individuals.

Foremost, I appreciate the generosity and assistance of the Institute for Northern Studies, Saskatoon, for supplying financial aid and the necessary equipment for the essential needs of the project. Supplementary assistance in the form of supplies and equipment came from the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

Special thanks go to the federal government's 1971 Opportunities for Youth Program which covered a certain proportion of sustenance expenses and wages. Also I am grateful to the Saskatchewan provincial government's 1971 S.T.E.P., and 1972 P.E.P. programs which paid for the wages of five crew members over the two field seasons.

Many individuals participated in the field and laboratory work. They include Greg Rabatich, Harvey Rogers, Don Beck and Hugh Crosby all from the University of Saskatchewan. Student crew members included Jonas Charles, a native Woodland Cree from Stanley Mission, Saskatchewan and Roger Steer from New Westminster, British Columbia. Additional thanks go to Gordon Moat for the long hours spent in the laboratory cataloguing and reconstructing artifacts.

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I am greatly indebted to Mr. Jim Chism, former Staff Archaeologist with National Historic Sites, Ottawa, for his timely help in supplying information on artifact analysis and historical documentation. Also his advice was invaluable regarding the aims of the project's survey, excavation, and its scope. Additional information concerning ceramic types was graciously supplied to me by Miss Lynne Sussman also of National Historic Sites.

I extend my sincere appreciation to Professor Urve Linnamae of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon for her invaluable help in the preparation of my 1971 and 1972 proposals for research, in the writing of preliminary reports and this report. Further thanks go to Dr. J. F. V. Millar also of the Department for suggesting Methy Portage as a research area, as well as helping prepare the initial 1971 proposal.

During field operations, numerous local individuals greatly contributed to the success of the project. I am grateful to Barry Stubbington, Regional D.N.R. Officer, Portage la Loche for his continuing assistance during all phases of the project over the two years. Barry supplied much needed air transportation along the portage, water transport down the Clearwater River during initial survey operations, as well as present-day trapping and fishing statistics for the Methy Portage area.

Further, many thanks are extended to Ross Girvan, Bill Harrison, and John Rempel of the local Portage la Loche R.C.M.P. constabulary for their help and interest in the project. As the artifacts, faunal and floral remains, and recordings were removed from the field the R.C.M.P. supplied storage space for these materials.

I wish to express my deep appreciation to Father Matthew of the Roman Catholic Mission, Portage la Loche for his sincere interest in the project and for supplying documentation concerning early missionary activities in the research area.

Finally, appreciation is extended to the many local Chipewyan trapper-fishermen who showed interest in the project, supplied information about late fur trade activities in the area and aided to some extent in survey of the sites encompassed by the project.

THE NORTH WEST COMPANY AND POSTS OF THE ENGLISH RIVER DISTRICT TO 1821

Previous to the termination of the Seven Years War, French traders dominated North American inland trade. As early as 1741, the French had a post, Fort Dauphin, on the northwest point of Lac des Prairies in present-day west-central Manitoba. Also in 1741 a second post, Fort Bourbon, was established on Riviere aux Biches (The Saskatchewan) close to Lake Bourbon (Cedar Lake), followed by Fort Paskoyac in the summer of 1750 near the present The Pas, Manitoba. (Morton, 1939: 195 - 96, and 231). Fort à la Corne was built in 1753, being the first trading establishment in what is now Saskatchewan.¹

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All flooring was laid on squared joists numbering nine in all (Fig. 6). They averaged 0.4 feet in width and were in their present state approximately 0.25 feet thick. In many instances, hand-forged nails were found in the flooring above a joist or simply in a joist where flooring was not present. There is no true evidence that the joists supported the sills.

The largest middle room (F2) has in part a clay floor making up 1/3 of the room's total area (F11). There is evidence in the form of isolated joists without flooring, numerous wood chips and concentrations of artifacts (principally beads and glass), to support the conclusion that part if not all of this moderately packed clayey lens within a medium gravel matrix was at one time covered by flooring (units 00.00 (E1/2) and 00.10E (W1/2)). The remaining clay area (unit 10S 10E) appears to be the original clay floor and probably was never covered by flooring. A large concentration of fish bones and three projectile points in a slight depression within this region could suggest a cleaning area for fish and game.

The master trading room fireplace (F6) in the largest room (F2) was well constructed (Figs. 6 and 7). It was in this feature that the greatest concentration of artifacts appeared. The other large fireplace (F4) did not possess as many artifacts, possibly because the feature was partly disturbed by relic hunters. Both hearths possessed a packed clay threshold directly in front of the main feature. The bulk of both fireplaces (including the collapsed chimney) was principally composed of igneous rocks (granitic) with isolated instances of limestone. To secure the stones in place and to seal off the openings, chinking was used extensively.

Of the two cellar depressions excavated, (F5 and F7) the largest one (F7) in the master trading room gave the most information regarding construction detail (N.B. The designation F7 is located approximately in the center of the cellar; the cellar extends approximately five feet out in all directions from that point) (Fig. 6). The maximum depth of this cellar was approximately three feet, dug into pure gravel (Fig. 9). No cribbing was used to shore up the sides. Excavations revealed that the cellar had a 'trap door' over the central opening. An abundance of artifacts was found, principally red earthenware pot fragments, gunflints, nails and tin fragments.

During excavations, no garbage or ash pile was discovered that might possibly have thrown light on the number of years of site occupation. However, stratigraphic sections found in the master trading room fireplace did give some indications. It was apparent from the ash and fish bone lens that the building was occupied for at least 2 years (seasonally). So far, artifactual remains within this lens has provided no additional support for this conclusion.

Artifacts

While the entire number of artifacts furnished by the excavation was relatively large for the size of the site, the proportion of sizable and unshattered objects was minimal. This is not surprising since any object of possible value would have been salvaged during abandonment of the post. The artifacts represented hunting and defence activities, construction materials, household and personal items, smoking equipment and ornaments, as well as native industries.

Kaolin Pipes (Plate I)

Four white clay pipe bowl fragments (A, B) and five pipe stem fragments (C, D) were found. All, except for one bowl fragment, were unidentifiable with regard to trademarking. The one marked piece possessed part of a "TD" design encompassed by a generally round, rope-like cartouche or wreath. This was probably the hallmark of the late eighteenth century manufacturer, Thomas Dormer of Bones Yard Lane, London (Oswald, 1960: 68).

Buttons (Plate I)

Five "mother-of-pearl" buttons (F) and one bone button (E) showed fancy workmanship and time involved in their manufacture. All specimens contained four well-placed perforations, save

one shell specimen with only two holes. The buttons were probably all manufactured at the site.

Beads (Plate I)

Several distinct bead types came to light throughout the entire building. Generally they were found in concentrations between floor boards. The types included large round beads (G), a faceted specimen (H), bugle beads (I), a round kaolin bead (J), a brass bead (K), one specimen with a light transparent green center and red exterior (L), tubular beads (M), a white-centered, red exterior bead, and a large white glass bead (N). Numerous small "seed" beads either blue or white in colour were found.

Earthenware (Plate II and III)

Approximately one hundred and fifty fragments of a very interesting red earthenware container were found in the two largest rooms near the east wall. Two-thirds of the container has been reconstructed to date which shows much of its basic form and method of manufacture. The pot is twelve inches in height and approximately seven inches wide at the shoulders. A transparent lead glaze has been applied to the interior only.

The item is probably a "Quebecois utility" pot of early Canadian manufacture. Donald Webster (*Early Canadian Pot-*

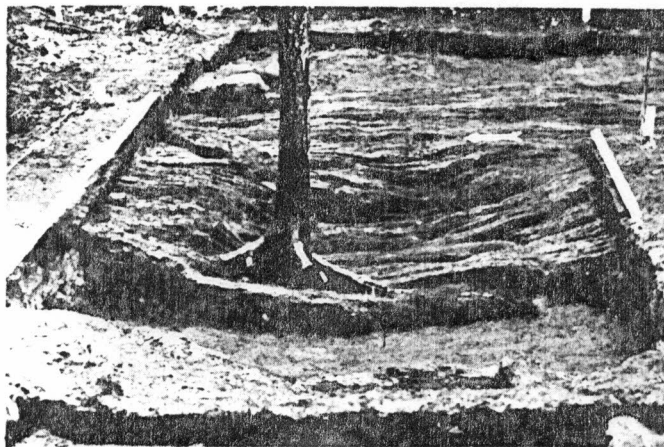


Figure 9. — View east showing floor boards which have collapsed into the large cellar of Master Trading Room (F2).

tery) describes one complete specimen of similar manufacture which is not unlike the La Loche House specimen (1971: 9). He dates the style at ca. 1770 - 1800 which encompasses the predicted La Loche House occupation period.

Such containers were used largely for conserving, producing, or storing food. They were used on the eighteenth and nineteenth century western frontier before vacuum canning became widespread in the 1860's (*ibid*: 9).

Gun Material (Plate IV)

Flintlock trade gun or "fusil" parts were found to be limited at La Loche House. They included one frizzen (G), one fragment of a triggerguard (H), one sear (I), and one breech plug (J). No identifying marks were present. The one iron trigger guard fragment has been broken off at both ends. One end reveals a portion of a countersunk screw hole. The total length of the specimen is 40.2 mm, the shaft is 11.6 mm wide, and approximately 2.7 mm thick. The tear drop shaped finial has been broken off just before the shaft.

The nearly complete breech plug had a screw diameter of 18.2 mm, with a maximum length, including the severed L-shaped appendage which extends back along the top of the stock, of 42.0 mm. The appendage is broken off at the screw hole.

The lone steel frizzen (G), is in excellent condition. Its height is 42.7 mm (includes only the vertical striking plate), 21.9 mm wide (maximum) with a maximum thickness of 5.9 mm.

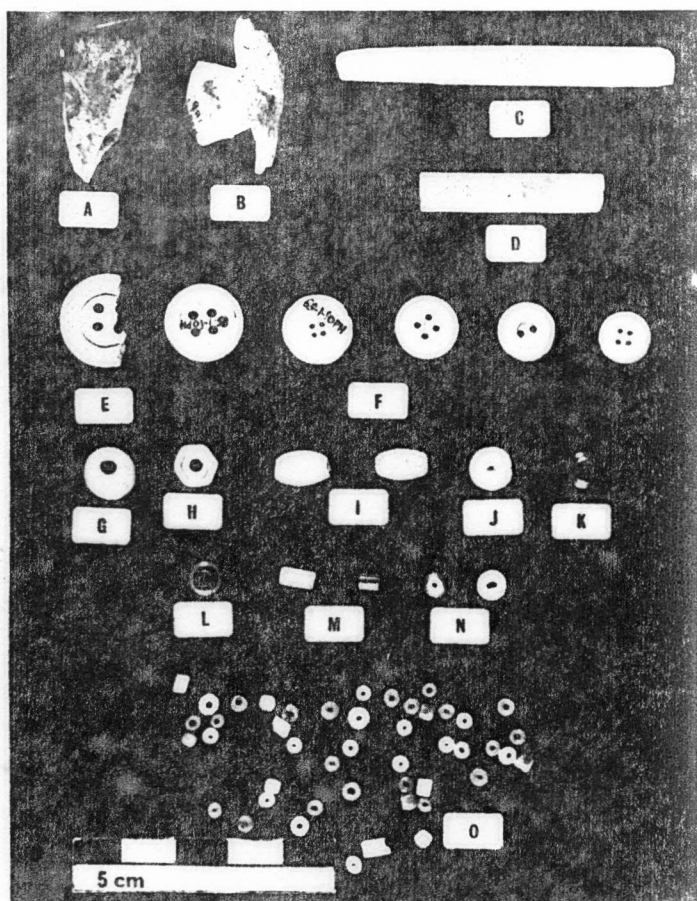


PLATE I.

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- A-B Kaolin pipe bowl fragments, "TD" design
- C-D Kaolin pipe stem fragments
- E Bone button
- F "Mother-of-pearl" buttons
- G Large light blue glass bead.
- H White faceted glass bead
- I White bugle bead; light blue bugle bead
- J White kaolin bead
- K Brass bead
- L Red and green glass bead
- M White tubular bead; dark blue tubular bead
- N Red and white round glass bead; white round glass bead
- O Light blue and white seed beads

PLATE II.

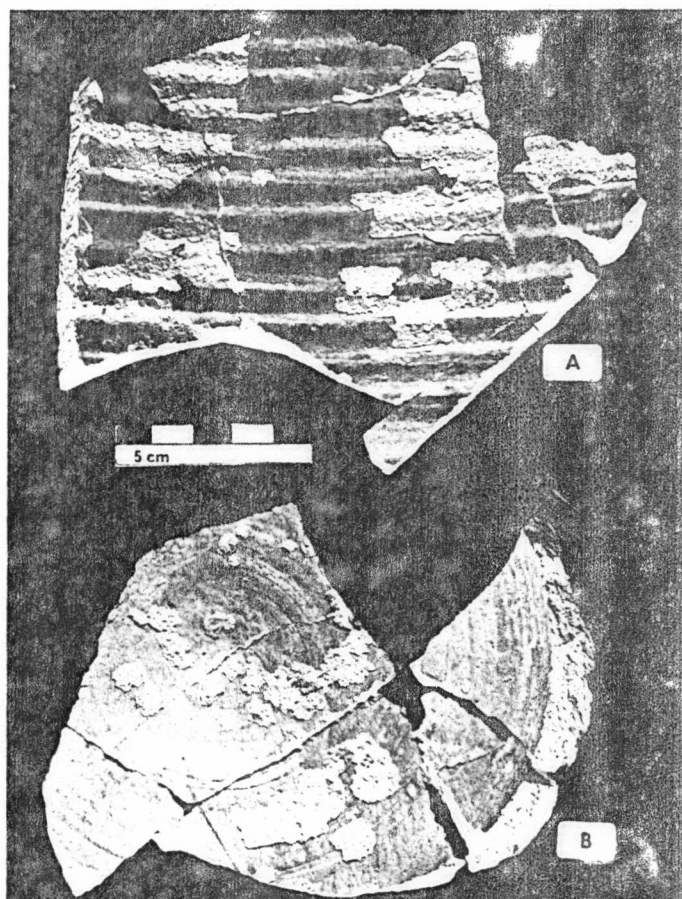


PLATE II.

- A Side fragment of earthenware container
- B Basal fragment of earthenware container