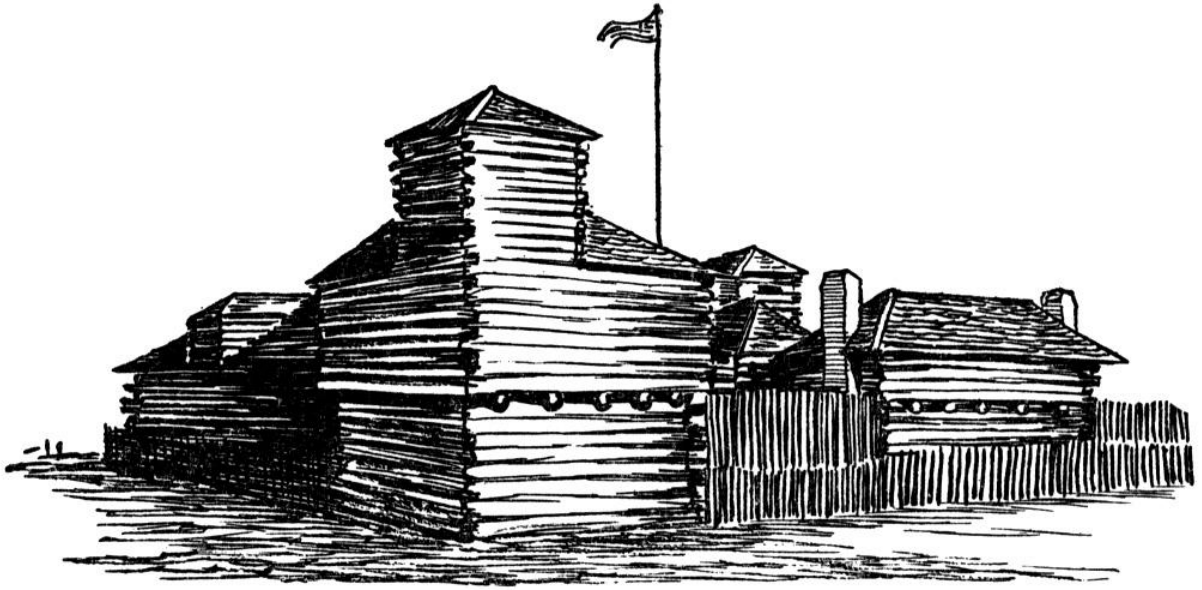


Fort Life



Hivernants: The Wintering Voyageurs

Who were the Hivernants?

Hivernants were experienced voyageurs who would spend their winters at a fort in the Interior. These men were a tough breed, and considered themselves above the Montreal-based, seasonal voyageurs. The hivernants were a well organized, prideful bunch of men, who lived comfortably in the harshest of environments. The hivernants often distinguished themselves from a common voyageur at summer rendezvous gatherings by camping on different sides of the fort than the common engages.

Hivernants were usually the men who constructed the forts they would live in. While still under the direct observation of the company clerks and investors, hivernants were granted a certain amount of freedom during the winter.



Hivernants carved out an amazing existence in a harsh environment

The average time spent in the Interior for a hivernant was 3-5 years, so they were very used to the unique lifestyle they had to develop by the time they were done with their obligation to the company. Many hivernants had families in the Interior. Cree and Ojibwe women became wives, and children soon followed. Even after the fur trade was over, many wintering voyageurs stayed in the interior to homestead. They started farms and carved out a magnificent existence in the face of danger and adversity. Many cities, like Winnipeg, Green Bay, and even Chicago owe their establishment to the voyageurs who never returned east. Forts became towns, and towns became cities.

When, where, and why were the forts established?

By now you should have a clearer understanding of who the voyageurs were and the important role they played in establishing trade routes throughout North America. The

voyageurs traveled around North America in birch bark canoes, developing trade relationships with the Native Americans. The voyageurs would trade manufactured goods for the furs that the Native Americans would trap. If you were a voyageur, chances are you would have been employed by the Hudson's Bay Company or later by the Northwest Company. As much as we know about their lives and travels, very little attention has been paid to what the voyageurs did during the winter, or while they were not traveling on the Voyageur Highway.

Beginning in the late 1600s and lasting through the mid 1800s, the interior of Canada and the northern United States was a vast network of fur trade posts and forts. It was at these posts and forts that the voyageurs and other employees of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company traded with the Native Americans. I like to think of the forts as early versions of malls. At the forts, you could get everything you needed to survive a winter in the interior. Clothes, guns, tools, pots and pans, blankets, beads, and food were only a few of the items traded.

Long before the railroads and telegraphs linked the east to the west, natural waterways provided transportation of goods, communication, and trade routes. Those people brave enough to leave the cities for the vast unknown and often hostile regions of the boreal forest were rewarded with solitude and a unique lifestyle.

Many of the first of the European explorers to travel west of Hudson Bay were employees of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). The Hudson's Bay Company was formed in 1670, and was "given" all of the land whose rivers flowed into the Hudson Bay, known as Rupert's Land.

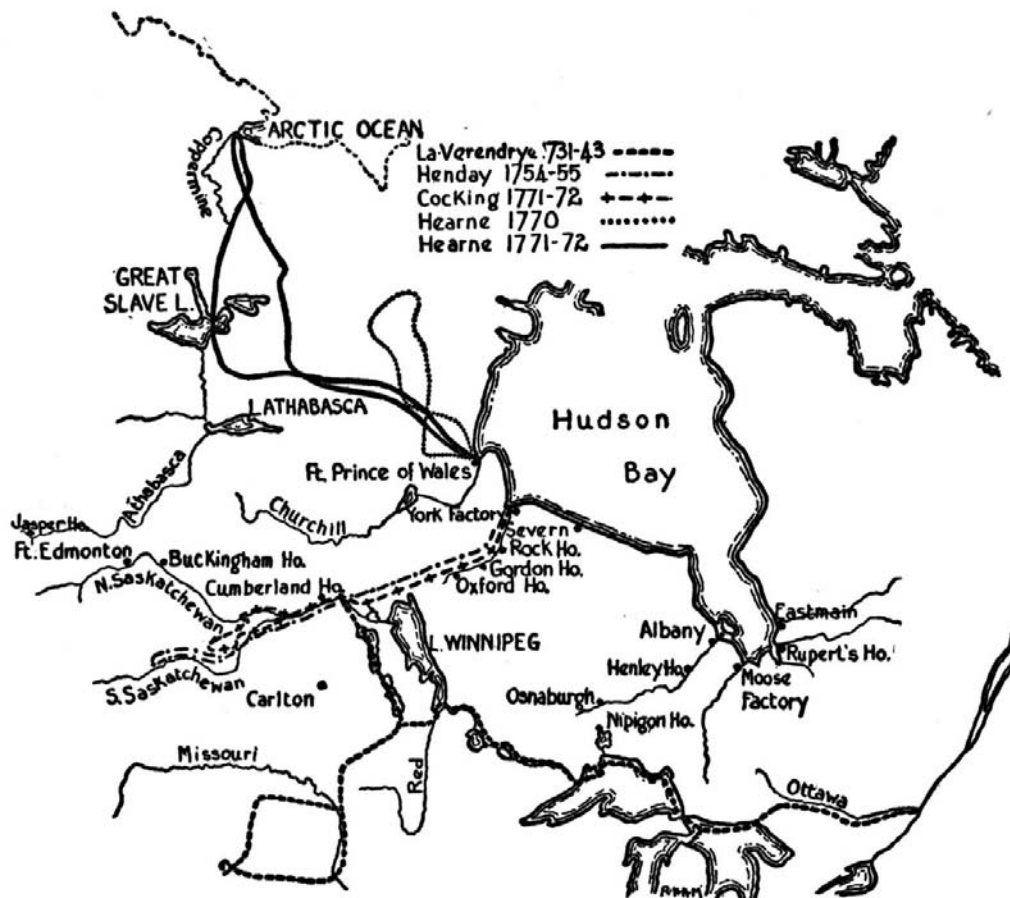


*The Crest of the Hudson's Bay Company. Pro Pelle Cutem roughly translates to:
For the Pelts We Collect, We Risk Our Skins*

Since the Hudson's Bay Company was in control of virtually all of present-day Quebec and parts of Ontario and Manitoba, they had to protect their land from people hoping to take the furs which the company felt entitled to.

Of course, you couldn't protect your land without being on it. So the Hudson's Bay Company began to establish a series of forts along the southern edge of Hudson Bay.

Forts like Ft. Prince of Wales, York Fort, New Severn House, Ft. Albany, Moose Fort, and Charles Fort were all established very early in the Hudson's Bay Company history. All of these forts were important in the establishment of the English presence on Hudson Bay.



The early forts served two purposes. With a fort, the company could continue to make profits year round, and also not have to send a new batch of voyageurs into the interior each year. It would be virtually impossible to travel to Hudson Bay from Montreal, establish trade relationships with the numerous bands of Cree, and return to Montreal in the same season before the waterways froze.

So, if you establish a place where everyone can meet to trade furs you eliminate a step, and increase your chances of making more money - something the Hudson's Bay Company was very keen on doing.

So why did the forts begin to be built further and further west? There are two answers to this question. First, as the fur trade progressed, beavers and other animals that were

prized for their furs began to disappear. The number of animals around Hudson Bay began to decrease as they were trapped. So the Cree and other Native American nations had to move west in search of better and more abundant furs, and the voyageurs and fur trade companies followed.

By the 1780s, HBC had fur posts established all the way to the Canadian Rockies, and as far north as Great Slave Lake. The amount of territory controlled by the Hudson's Bay Company grew in leaps and bounds. Each year new forts were established and more and more furs were carried back to east. These same furs would eventually end up in Europe!

To see a map of the Hudson's Bay Company Territory from 1670-1764 visit:

http://www.canadiana.org/hbc/hist/hist6_e.html

To see a map of how much the Hudson's Bay Company Territory grew visit:

http://www.canadiana.org/hbc/hist/hist7_e.html

However, things were about to change for the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1779, a group of Scottish business men decided to throw their hat in the fur trade ring, and the North West Company was established. They streamlined their business practices and traded higher quality goods than the HBC, promoting healthy and fierce competition.



Trading with the Cree on the banks of a Canadian River

In the 100 years since their formation, the Hudson's Bay Company had been reluctant to change their business strategies, even though the east was quickly modernizing and the interior was home to many more European settlers. The North West Company quickly moved in to the southern reaches of the Hudson's Bay Company and began to swallow them up.

By the early 1800s there was a full scale fur war. The rival companies would often establish forts on the same lakes, even directly across rivers from each other.



Voyageurs were quickly reaching the interior of Canada with the help of their Cree and Ojibwe guides

However, since the fur trade was dependant on fashion, and fashions change, the profits of the fur trade were only as strong as the desire for furs.

During the mid 1800s, the desire for beaver felted hats diminished. Since the fur trade basically revolved around beaver pelts, once the desire for beaver dried up, so did the fur trade war. The North West Company merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821 as a direct result of the fierce competition.

How were forts built?

When the voyageurs reached the area at which they planned on wintering over, their first step was to erect a fort. Many times, Cree or Ojibwe chiefs were consulted as to the best site to build. The fort had to be easily defended and also give access to the waterways.

Forts were chosen based on location. The fort had to be near a native village (who builds a store where there are no customers to be found?). The fort must also be near good game fields, so that men could supplement their meager food rations during harsh winters with a deer or moose. The area also had to have abundant trees for fuel and building purposes. Good fishing was always a perk as well.

Trees were cleared and hewed where the fort would stand. Usually the first building to take shape would be a storehouse and shop. The voyageurs were used to sleeping underneath their canoes, and so housing would usually be the last building constructed.

The common voyageur housing was shared with other wintering voyageurs. Only the Investors and other clerks of the company were the only ones who got their own housing. Grace Lee Nute writes about the construction of housing, "A puncheon floor was laid, bunks were constructed against the walls, rough tables and stools were made, and a window or two was filled with oiled deerskin in lieu of glass. Such a cabin, filled with the odors of game roasting on a blazing grate which flung fantastic shadows over guns, knives, and snowshoes on the walls, was not an unhomelike place, and it was the prototype of many a pioneer's home as the frontier moved westward."

Forts were constructed with unbelievable speed. Accounts of buildings being erected in a week (including felling and hewing the trees), and completely finished (with chimneys) in three week's time are not uncommon.

In order to survive the harsh winters, voyageurs had to look to their Ojibwe and Cree neighbors for guidance. Wild rice was harvested in the fall. However, many forts opted to trade their goods for food. Maple sugar and wild rice were brought to the fort by native women and traded all year long.



Wild Rice was gathered by the Ojibwe and Cree and then traded to hungry voyageurs at the fort

Smoking fish, making pemmican, and preserving fresh foods in root cellars was necessary if the voyageurs were going to eat all winter long. Gardens planted in the

summer would often yield potatoes, turnips, beans, peas, and other vegetables which were then preserved to last through the winter.

There were two meals served each day, one in the morning and again in the evening. However, no matter how well supplied with food, forts generally began to run low on food throughout the winter. The hungry voyageurs would often have to set up trap lines or rely on the forest for food.

Activities Inside and Outside the Fort

The fort required quite a bit of maintenance. Constantly repairing buildings, working in the workshop, building new snowshoes, mending dog harnesses, and preparing for the up-coming thaw always kept the hivernants quite busy. Yet, there was also quite a bit of free-time afforded to each wintering voyageur.

During the long winters, the hivernants would have to find ways to entertain themselves. Singing and playing music were a reliable source of entertainment. Often after dinner, casks of rum would be broken into, and the tables would be pushed aside and dances would be called.

Hivernants were also very good mushers. Working dogs could always be found at forts. Voyageurs would have to keep in contact with nearby forts and the only way to do that would be to harness up the dogs and head out on the trail.

Dog sledding also provided the hivernants the opportunity to try their hand at trapping and hunting. The hivernants' trap-lines would usually be maintained for recreation rather than fur collection. The French Canadians and English in the interior were no match for the superior trapping skills of the native people. However, checking trap lines was a great escape from the monotony of fort life.

Activities for the Classroom

Objective: Students will gain a greater understanding of fur posts in North America by researching their purpose and history.

Skills Used: Understand trade as an exchange of goods or services, Apply skills of historical interpretation, Ask questions and seek answers by collecting and analyzing data from historic sources, Describe how North America’s population developed, locate, describe, and explain places in North America, Understand relationships between geographic factors and society, Guided Internet research

Procedure: Divide students into groups of three or four. Assign each group a fort to research from the table below.

FORT	WEB RESEARCH
Fort Prince of Wales	http://www.hudsonbayheli.com/Charters/Historic_Tour/Prince_of_Wales_Fort/body_prince_of_wales_fort.html
Cumberland House	http://www.kcdc.sk.ca/comm/Cumberland%20House.php
Fort William	http://www.tbaytel.net/tbhms/furtrade.htm
Fort Chipewyan	http://www.gov.ab.ca/home/about_alberta/history_furtrade.cfm

Have students research the forts and answer the first 6 questions of the “Let’s Build A Fort, But Where?” worksheet

Discuss with student the fur trade expansion. Talk about why forts located further west weren’t able to trade directly with Montreal.

Let's Build A Fort, But Where?

Research a particular fort on the internet to answer the following questions.

1. What is your fort's name? _____
2. This fort was established in what year? _____
3. My fort was controlled by this company. _____
4. The founder of the fort was _____
5. My fort is/was located _____
6. Today, my fort is _____

Locate where your fort would have been on the map below. Mark its location.



Explain why was the location of your fort important to the fur trade?

Provision the Fort!

It's August of 1771, and you're the company clerk for the Hudson's Bay Company. Never mind that being far from home is drag, but you have 74 men that are counting on you to order the correct amount of supplies to keep them fed and healthy over the winter. There 75 men at the fort. The last canoe brigade from Montreal has just arrived at the fort and you need to take enough of their supplies to last through winter.

Wild Rice will be harvested soon, so you had better get some supplies that the Cree will be willing to trade the rice for. All you have to go on is last year's trade prices. The men said they were adequately provisioned, so it'd be a good model to work from.

Each man needs to be allotted 3 lbs. of food per day. It will be 120 days until the next canoe brigade will arrive at the fort.

Here's what you already have:

Smoked Fish	475 lbs.
Dried Pemmican	1,500 lbs.
Wild Rice	1800 lbs.
Misc. Vegetables	1375 lbs.

The fort's farm also has 20 goats which will each provide 40 lbs. of meat. The fort's farm also has 19 cows which will each provide 130 lbs. of meat.

You can count on the men hunting and trapping. Last year they took three 400-lb. moose, 120 4-lb. rabbits, 75 6-lb. beaver, and 112 3-lb ptarmigan over the course of the winter.

The canoe brigade has to offer: Expected trade value in lbs. of food

70 guns	3,500
100 blankets	6,000
200 yards of Cloth	2,200
Misc. Metalware	4,000

WORKSHEET

Fill in the blanks, step-by-step to purchase the correct amount of supplies.

- _____ Number of men at the fort
- _____ # of lbs. of food/person/day
- _____ # of lbs. for the whole fort each day
- _____ # of days until the next canoe brigade
- _____ # of lbs. of food needed to last through winter
- _____ # of lbs. of food the fort already has
- _____ # of lbs. of food the goats will bring
- _____ # of lbs. of food the cows will bring
- _____ # of lbs. of food moose will bring
- _____ # of lbs. of food rabbits will bring
- _____ # of lbs of food beaver will bring
- _____ # of lbs. of food ptarmigan will bring
- _____ # of lbs the fort has and can expect to bring in from hunting/farming
- _____ # of lbs. still needed to survive the winter
- _____ # of lbs. trade goods will bring in
- _____ Total # lbs. of food for the winter

Will you be able to survive the winter? _____

Questions for the Chat Room or Classroom Discussion

Topic: Fort Life/ Hivernants

Suggested Questions for Discussion

What were the hivernants?

Why were the hivernants important to the fur trade?

How did the formation of the North West Company affect the fur trade?

Where was the Hudson's Bay Company formed?

Is the Hudson's Bay Company still around today?

Why did the forts move further west from Hudson Bay?

What impact did the fur trade have on the Native Americans?

Who built the forts?

How long did it take to build a fort?

Who lived at a fort?

What did the wintering voyageurs do for fun?

How did the forts get re-supplied?

How often did the canoe brigades come to the forts?

Why did the forts begin to disappear?

Where were the forts located? How did the companies choose the locations?

What happened to the North West Company?

What did the hivernants do for fun during the winter?

What type of buildings could be found at a fort?

Are there any forts left today? Where are they located?