

FORT DESJARLAIS

1.

Archaeology on the Souris River

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Of all the ruined archeological sites I have visited, the trading posts along the Souris River between its mouth and American border stand out in my mind. Since the 1930s they have been attacked by diggers using everything from spades to backhoes. Excepting one instance, no records were kept of these crude excavations. The artifacts have been very literally scattered from coast to coast.

“It was after the war when we were digging out there... me and another guy just kept shovelling—Mr. McMorran and his friend were rummaging through the dirt to see if they could find anything. They were the scholars—they were the ones who knew what they were doing.”

I had already heard about similar excavations in the 1960s and 70s. They too had been conducted by amateurs wanting to advance the cause of science; without having, as McMorran’s group had, the excuse that prairie archaeology was not yet well developed. Others were performed by amateurs wishing to advance the cause of their arrowhead collections. Both types of work had been conducted with plenty of enthusiasm and not much else.

The old-timer who had worked with McMorran’s group passed me a heavy door key. “I dug that one up at Fort Mr. Grant. Keep it... I guess I don’t have any use for it.” He was not sure how many of the forts they had dug at. I thanked him for the key; wondering, had it been found *in situ* rather than in an office many miles away, what an archaeologist could have told me about it.

I paid a melancholy visit to one of those fort sites that afternoon—April 26, 1986. There was a light drizzle falling. By itself, a small chunk of sand—carrying some of the ashes of the fur fort—tumbled down the thirty-foot embankment into the river.

La Vérendrye was the first white man recorded to have reached the Souris River, in 1738. He named it “Riviere Saint-Pierre”—in honour of himself.

It was quite some time before this rich river valley was exploited. The Indians brought their furs to Hudson's Bay. When the Canadians forced inland trade, a cluster of posts at the junction of the Assiniboine and the Souris—then called the "Mouse River" was considered sufficient. There were ample returns from these stores—and thus no reason to go any closer to the dreaded Sioux.

The North West Company built what became known as "Ash House" in 1795 not far from the present-day town of Hartney. It was abandoned, as David Thompson commented when he visited the area two years later, because "it was too open to the incursions of the Sioux."

The unexploited condition of the Souris was not lasting. The Hudson's Bay Company established Lena House in the Turtle Mountains in 1801 to serve as an outpost of Brandon House. Alexander Henry passed through the Souris Valley in 1806 on a trading expedition; and, to make up for the negligence of the two companies, an unspecified number of American and independent posts began to infiltrate the area.

This became a source of concern for the Company to such an extent that, when Brandon House was abandoned in 1824, measures were taken to prevent furs from moving south across the border. The locals in the vicinity of the Souris Mouth were given special license to trade on the understanding that any furs received would be taken to Fort Garry. Governor George Simpson then supplied the controversial Cuthbert Grant and one Louis Giboche with an outfit to trade from Turtle Mountain to Qu'Appelle; and, plainly, to "harass" the illicit traders on the Souris.

In reporting this action to London three years later, Simpson wrote: "...as they have a number of Indian and half-breed relations and are intimately acquainted and connected with all the different tribes in that quarter and are not directly in the service of the Honourable Company they have it more in their power to harass our opponents than we could with a formidable establishment."

Cuthbert Grant, having been at the forefront of the Seven Oaks massacre and other Métis action against the Red River colonists, was well known for his harassment capabilities.

Thus, along the river not far from where the North West Company attempted to establish Ash House, the man who preceded Louis Riel as the leader of the Métis erected an oak stockade that was to become known alternately as "Fort Cuthbert Grant," "Fort Mr. Grant," "Mr. Grant House," and "Grant House."

After operating as an independent for four years, Grant was placed “directly in the service of the Honourable Company.” On a salary—and with the magnificent title of “Warden of the Plains”—Grant was expected to keep the Americans and independents out of the Souris Valley; and, of course, keep the Sioux away from the vulnerable settlement at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine.

Holding the Sioux at bay was no simple task. Battles between Sioux and Assiniboine and attacks on Métis hunting parties were far too common for anyone’s liking. In fact, it was to be nearly sixty years before all danger of Sioux aggression had passed.

Grant apparently made quick work of the American posts in the valley. The independents, however, were not so easily removed. In 1835 the Council of Assiniboia imposed a 7 1/2 % revenue tax on imports into the colony at Red River. The London office reduced the tax to 4% but it did not appease the settlers. Many turned to smuggling furs to the Americans for higher prices.

2.

An independent fur trader on the Souris

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One of the attempts at more organized independent trading was a store set up by Joseph Desjarlais in 1836.

The elder Joseph Desjarlais was baptized in 1754 in Contrecoeur, Quebec. He moved to the North-West, where he married a Métis woman in 1785. He had at least three sons: Joseph, born in 1791; Antoine, born in 1793; and Marcel, born in 1803. The elder Joseph may have been a fur trader; licences for 1783 included one for a Joseph “Desjerlais.”

Indian names have survived for two of the Desjarlais sons. Marcel was called “Quewezas” and Joseph “Mitche Cote,” or “Hairy Legs.” Following the translation through Baraga’s 1878 dictionary, “Mitche Cote” would be “Misigade.” The same source would make “Quewezas” “Kwiwisens,” “a boy.” Both are in Saulteaux, and both were likely applied before they went to the Souris River.

Antoine Desjarlais, the middle son, entered the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company. He operated a post in the Turtle Mountains as an interpreter from

1848 to 1855. The other two sons were operating in a more subversive manner—possibly with Antoine’s help.

Joseph Desjarlais—the oldest of the three—chose a perfect site for his trading post. Nestled among the sand hills near present-day Lauder, he erected a sturdy oak palisade. On the grid laid out by the Dominion Land Survey nearly twenty years after the post had vanished, the fort lay on the northwest quarter of Section 31, Township 5, Range 24. The site was about thirty feet above the level of the Souris, which ran past the south wall. Within the stockade—perhaps as large as one hundred fifty feet square—there stood one long log building and several smaller ones. It was an effective stronghold—as it had to be. Not only was it situated in the territory frequented by Sioux war parties, but Desjarlais had also had the audacity to establish his post some five miles from Cuthbert Grant—whose job it was to halt independent operations.

Fort Desjarlais, as it came to be known, was serviced more by Red River carts than by canoes. The Yellow Quill Trail, running from a point twenty miles from Fort Garry up the Assiniboine and Souris Rivers, served both Fort Cuthbert Grant and Fort Desjarlais before splitting into independent branches serving North Dakota and the Turtle Mountains. In addition to this, there was the Hudson’s Bay Trail that ran north through the sand hills from Fort Desjarlais.

Francis Jaunotte, whose children would give precious details about the Souris River posts nearly a century later, carried goods for the forts. He married Madeline Falcon—the daughter of Pierre Falcon, the Red River bard—in 1861 in St. Francis Xavier. Colonel Dana Wright, who studied the forts in the 1930s, reported Jaunotte’s grandson saying that: “[he] used to go down the lakes to Montreal for good[s] to bring back to trade... at different times he worked for both the Northwest Co. and the HB people, and that he had worked at two forts on the Souris R., one Ft. Desjarlaise [sic] and the other known as Ft. Cuthbert Grant.” Wright also reported Francois’ daughter Filomen Lafontaine saying that “Francois Jaunotte had worked in both of them, assisting the manager, labouring, packing fur and traveling east with fur and bringing back supplies...”

Viewing these statements, it is likely that Jaunotte made his trips to Montreal while with the North West Company. The communication from both forts was probably with North Dakota, St. Francis Xavier, and the Red River.

Because of the location of the store, Desjarlais’s relationships with his many neighbours were important. The Sioux, because of their ability to attack and quite possibly overwhelm the post at will, were perhaps the most important of all.

Desjarlais likely relied on the strength of his position as defence. Reports indicate that he had approximately seventy-five men with him.

With so many Sioux aggressions in southern Manitoba, Desjarlais could not have avoided them all. Shortly before his post opened, Sioux-Assiniboine wars had ranged as far as the Souris mouth. In 1849 a Sioux-Assiniboine battle was fought only a few miles away, and Sioux attacked Métis family groups as late as 1860.

His dealings with the Cree and Assiniboine would have been friendlier. Circumstances dictate that he traded with them. One incident that survived in legend was the killing of two Assiniboine within the stockade by a band of Cree. One would assume, therefore, that both tribes frequented the store.

3. Cuthbert Grant

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Relations with the Métis were, of course, good. The buffalo brigades camped near both Fort Desjarlais and Fort Cuthbert Grant during the summer months. They were Desjarlais's Red River relations.

That was probably the main reason Desjarlais was able to survive for so long so close to the Warden of the Plains. Of course, Grant never allowed them freedom without restraint. Peter Garrioch, who operated a post on the Souris River south of the American border briefly in the 1840s, passed through Fort Cuthbert Grant in January 1846. He recorded in his journal that "Mr. Grant had seized the goods and furs of several of the traders." One that he called "Quewezas"—the Indian name for Marcel Desjarlais, Joseph's brother—was foremost on the list. Since Garrioch did not mention him, it is likely that Joseph was not in the post at the time. Garrioch also noted that the magistrates had "the good sense to refuse to have anything to do with this business."

It is possible that Grant's 1846 action against Fort Desjarlais was in response to Governor Christie's 1844 crackdown on independent traders. Christie had forbidden the import of goods in Company ships by settlers who would not sign a declaration that they did not deal in furs; and, in addition, ordered that the sender's name be printed on each envelope sent so that the mail of anyone suspected of illicit trading could be seized.

It appears that Grant did look the other way at least some of the time. According to Indian sources living in the Turtle Mountains in the 1930s, Desjarlais had connections with an independent trader in the Turtle Mountains. It is highly possible that the contact was Antoine, Joseph's brother, who operated the small Hudson's Bay Company post there.

Cuthbert Grant—despite his Hudson's Bay Company affiliations and his fading leadership role among the Métis—was still family as well. In fact, Jean-Baptiste Desjarlais, Antoine's son, who was with his Uncle Joseph at the post, married Cuthbert's daughter Julie.

Regardless, Grant apparently lost interest in his post on the Souris sometime in the 1830s. Grantown—St. Francis Xavier—required his attentions; and, although his fort was operated until 1861, he likely spent little time there. In addition, the trial of Guillaume Sayer in 1849 effectively ended the penalty for independent traders. With Cuthbert Grant's leadership of the Métis having been largely supplanted, and with there being little point in authorities corralling independent traders, Desjarlais would have had no worries from that quarter.

Antoine's son-in-law, Charles Demontigny, was also at the fort. One would assume from Garrioch's comment that the third Desjarlais brother, Marcel, was also there periodically. Father Picton, in his papers in the St. Boniface Historical Society, notes that Antoine and Marcel were in the Turtle Mountains in the 1850s. Either Demontigny or Marcel could have controlled the operation when Joseph was absent.

It seems that Joseph spent a certain amount of time in St. Francis Xavier. He married either Josette Sayer or Josette Richard there (these could have been the same person), and eventually had twelve children.

Among the seventy-five men estimated to have been at the post, Eusebe Ledour and Simon Blondin are the only other names that have survived. The oral sources that provided so much information about the fort were unable to recall any others.

The same oral tradition would have it that Desjarlais and his men were whiskey traders. The number of broken bottles that have been found on the site seem to support this conclusion.

The only general conclusions that can be drawn about the fort are that it was an independent trading post that used liquor in its dealings with the Indians and ran furs over the American border. In addition, Desjarlais's men quite likely joined

the buffalo brigades in the summer months. This would have given them robes, provisions, and pemmican to sell to the Hudson's Bay Company.

Oral sources reported that the fort lasted for twenty years, making 1856 approximately the year that it ceased operation. The site shows that the post burned. It has been assumed that it was abandoned because of the fire, but this seems unlikely. The site has revealed nothing that would not have been standard post rubbish; and, if the fort had actually burned during operation, it seems probable that other artifacts would have been found. Fort Cuthbert Grant was abandoned under peaceful circumstances, and it has yielded a far larger quantity of artifacts.

The most plausible fate of Fort Desjarlais, then, is that Joseph and his men pulled out when the returns in the Souris Valley declined. The building was either fired by the retreating traders or burned later by a prairie fire or other cause.

4. 1934 rediscovery of Fort Desjarlais

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It is not known where Joseph Desjarlais went after he left the area. The Indians in the Turtle Mountains in the 1930s said that he had at one time operated a temporary post on the Souris River near Minot, North Dakota. It is possible that he went there after he abandoned the Hartney area; and, in fact, McMorrان reported in 1934 that: "Indians of settlement day say [he] moved south towards the Mandan villages when the decline of trade forced the abandonment of the Lauder area about 80 years ago [ca. 1854]." Francois Jeannotte's daughter Filomen, on the other hand, correct in so many verifiable facts, said that he went to set up a post on the Beaver River.

Fort Desjarlais was beyond all doubt independent, but some confusing evidence was left. Henry Youle Hind, on his 1860 map, marked a Hudson's Bay Company winter post corresponding with Fort Desjarlais. Since Desjarlais's operation was abandoned and presumably destroyed by that time; and, until 1861, since Grant's post was still functioning, one would assume that Hind was referring to Fort Cuthbert Grant.

Filomen Lafontaine recalled: "of course this store was selling Hudson Bay goods." Well, with Antoine's help, perhaps it was.

When settlers, first saw the site of Fort Desjarlais in the 1880s, stumps of the burned oak pickets still showed. By that time few people knew what it had been.

A search was undertaken during the first decade of the twentieth century for Ash House, the early North West Company post. It was during the course of this search, quite accidentally, that Fort Desjarlais was discovered in 1934.

The group that researched and dug at the fort—as well as others in the area—were the learned men of their time. G.A. McMorran was the editor of the *Plaindealer* and published several articles and papers about the forts. Dr. D.A. Stewart—who had engineered an "archaeological disaster" by excavating the McKay Mound in 1931—was past-president of the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba and had earlier contributed to the study of the fur forts at the Souris mouth. Colonel Dana Wright of the United States Treasury Department; Manitoba historian A.S. Morton; site-owner George Landreth and several other enthusiasts helped in the work at various levels.

Colonel Dana Wright discovered Francois Jeunotte's grandson by accident, and that discovery led him to Filomen Lafontaine. From her home in Grande Clairiere, not far from the forts, Madame Lafontaine recalled stories about the forts for eager listeners.

On more than one occasion they visited the fort sites. Fort Desjarlais was not much different then than now. The line of ashes—varying from one to four inches in depth—disclosed the presence of the post. Even then, riverbank erosion was eating away at the site.

In five decades of indiscriminate digging at the fort, only one legitimate excavation—done in 1967—was ever performed. Little was discovered.

The story of Fort Desjarlais, besides being a statement for the preservation of our archaeological sites, is a lesson in the importance of oral history. Only one or two vague references to the post exist in surviving records. With the riverbank erosion and the vandalism of the site that continues to this day, there is little hope that archaeology could provide any conclusion about the construction of the fort, its operation, or its fate. If the researchers had not stumbled onto Madame Lafontaine in the 1930s, it is possible that the very existence of the post would be unknown today.

Desjarlais' operation gives us clues about the lifestyle and the attitudes of the Red River Métis living in the pre-1870 era, and provides valuable insight into the

independent trading posts that operated in defiance of the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly.

My thanks are extended to Alfred Fortier, Agent de développement, Société Franco-Manitobaine, and to the many other scholars who helped me find "old Joe Desjarlais."