

# FORT PITT TO EDMONTON

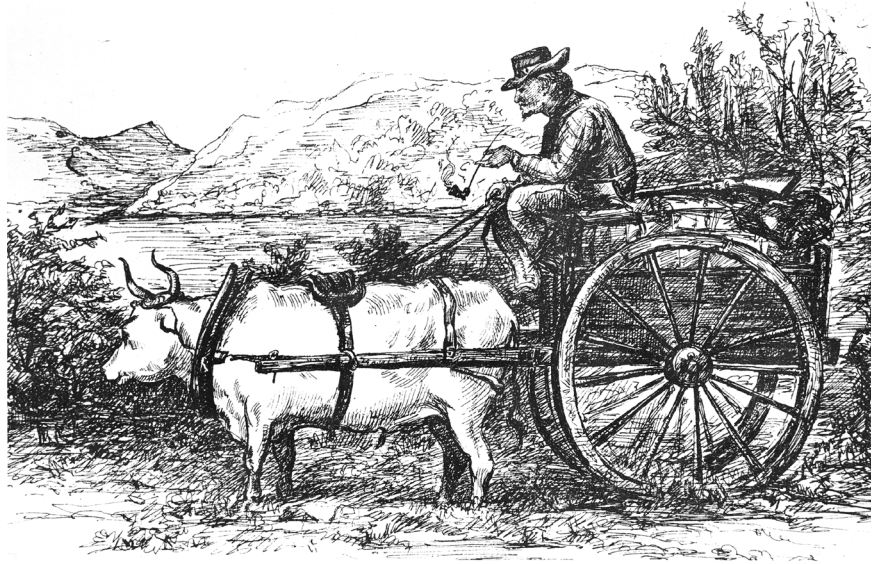


## *The Other Route*

▼  
by  
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Fort Edmonton was arguably the most important Hudson's Bay Company (HBCo) post west of Fort Garry for most of its active lifetime, 1795 to about 1890. Fort Pitt, for many years the closest post to the east of Fort Edmonton, was built in 1829 and decommissioned in 1890. Fort Pitt always remained a small fort; it mostly existed as a "provisioning post," supplying dried meat and pemmican to the company as food for their York boat crews as well as supplying some of the food requirements of the more northern posts which had no access to the great bison herds of the plains. Fort Pitt was located close to these herds, especially during their winter migration to the sheltered parkland region in the vicinity of the fort.

In the 1850s and 1860s the core business of the HBCo was trading goods for furs, mostly with the aboriginal inhabitants of Rupert's Land. In the spring Fort Edmonton was a very busy place, with furs arriving from the outlying posts such as Jasper House, Rocky Mountain House, and Fort Assiniboine. These furs were bundled into 90-pound packs ("pieces"), loaded into York boats, and sent down to York Factory by way of Norway House for shipment to England. Trade goods would be unloaded from the ships and transported labouriously back upriver to Fort Edmonton to be traded there or transhipped to the outlying posts in the Saskatchewan District.

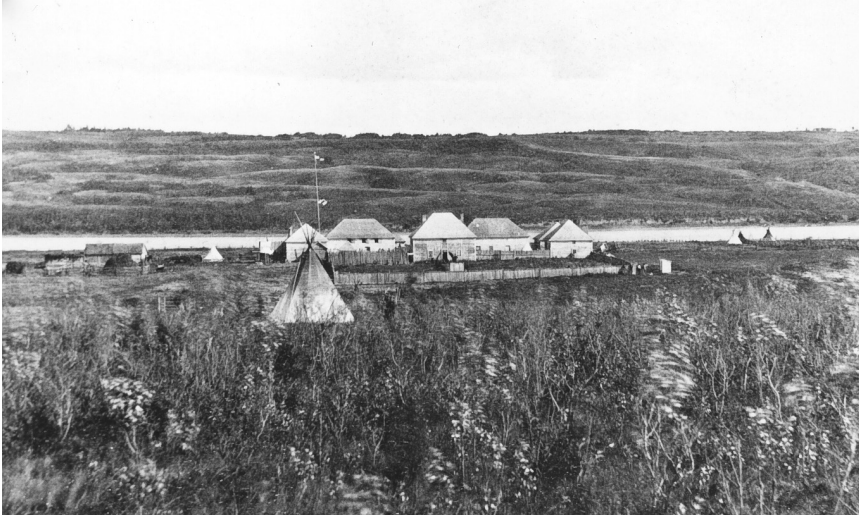


For much of the period the majority of freight travel between York Factory and Edmonton was accomplished using York boats. These workhorse boats plied the waters of the North Saskatchewan River for fifty to sixty years, speeding downstream in the spring loaded with furs and returning slowly upstream in late summer and early fall. Then, within a few years, the company changed the whole system for freighting goods to many of their western posts.

The 1850s saw a flurry of railroad building in the United States, including the construction of a line from the East to St. Paul, Minnesota (on the Mississippi River) and then north to St. Cloud, Minnesota. Suddenly, the HBCo had an alternative to the costly and time-consuming York Factory transportation system. In the late 1850s Sir George Simpson, HBCo Governor-in-Chief, recognized the opportunities of this system and the company began to send test shipments of freight up the Mississippi River to St. Paul, by railroad to St. Cloud, and by ox cart for 300 kilometres to Fort Garry on the Red River. From Fort Garry, freight bound for the major western posts such as Carlton and Edmonton was hauled by ox cart.

For several years the HBCo continued to use the York boats from Norway House and York Factory to haul some of the freight, but by about 1865 the vast majority of freight arriving in Fort Edmonton came by ox carts travelling in brigades of many dozens of carts. The route taken from Fort Garry through Carlton and continuing northwest became known as the Carlton Trail.

This is a typical Red River cart of the type used on the Fort Pitt to Edmonton route. The sketch by Henri Julien was made near Dufferin in 1874.



Fort Pitt was a Hudson's Bay Company trading post on the North Saskatchewan River. It was photographed by N.O. Cote in 1884.

The HBCo typically used oxen to pull the carts over the trail. Horses could travel faster but could normally pull only about half the weight that of an ox. Most carts were made at Red River and were seldom returned to that location as they were usually worn out after making a trip all the way to Fort Edmonton. According to Edmonton's Chief Factor, William J. Christie, these carts could be sold to Freemen at Edmonton or Lac Ste. Anne "at no loss."<sup>1</sup> The oxen usually were wintered in the Edmonton area at a "cattle guard" although some were sent east to Fort Pitt or Fort Carlton if winter hay supplies were not adequate.

Fort Carlton, located on the North Saskatchewan near present day Rosthern, Saskatchewan, became a transportation hub with trade goods being distributed from that point either to the west or to the north, depending on their ultimate destination. Goods destined for Edmonton were routed through Fort Pitt. In an 1862 Edmonton report, HBCo Chief Factor Christie described the route: "From Fort Pitt to Edmonton 10 days with loaded carts ... Road keeps on the South side of the river all the way to Edmonton."<sup>2</sup>

Although during the 1860s the HBCo was the main source of travel along this route, earlier travellers also made use of this trail. On August 4, 1859, when the Earl of Southesk left Fort Pitt for Edmonton he wrote in his journal: "We got the carts and everything across the river...."<sup>3</sup> Since Fort Pitt was on the north side of the North Saskatchewan River, Southesk was obviously planning to take the same general southern route as later HBCo freighters. Even earlier, Sir George Simpson, on his 1842 journey around the

world, remarked: "Though we were now on the safer side of the Saskatchewan, in the country of the Crees, (at Fort Pitt, on the north side of the river) yet, in order to save a day's march on the distance between Fort Pitt and Edmonton, we resolved to cross the river into the territory of the Blackfeet...."<sup>4</sup> Simpson's party was travelling on horseback, but they also had a few carts to carry the governor's ample quantities of baggage. However, the most noteworthy cart trip taken on this route, and subsequently mapped, was made by Dr. James Hector, of the Palliser Expedition, in the spring of 1859. The route of the cart trip taken by this hardy and well-known explorer is shown on an accompanying map.<sup>5</sup>

A number of writers, when discussing the trail from Fort Pitt to Edmonton, refer to the route as if it was always on the north side of the river. For example, J.G. McGregor describes the route in terms that would lead the reader to that conclusion.<sup>6</sup> Another author, R.C. Russell, does not deviate from the apparently conventional wisdom that this trail always wound its way from Fort Pitt to Edmonton on the north side of the river.<sup>7</sup>

However, records provide clear evidence that for a period of time, at least when carts were used, the normal route was the southern one. In 1864 Dr. John Rae, of Arctic exploration fame, was commissioned to survey the route for a telegraph line from St. Paul, Minnesota, to Quesnel, British Columbia. At Fort Pitt he divided his party in half, with himself, two men and pack horses travelling along the north side of the North Saskatchewan River to Edmonton while his assistant, Mr. Schwieger, "... with the wagon and carts and four men took the usual cart trail south of the river to Fort Edmonton..." Dr. Rae also commented that the northern route: "...is capable of much improvement as at present that portion of it between this place [Edmonton] and the east side of the Snake Hill allows only pack horses to pass."<sup>8</sup>

The use of ox carts to haul goods to Fort Edmonton began in approximately 1861 and continued as the main transportation method until steamboats began to ply the waters of the North Saskatchewan River in 1875.<sup>9</sup> The use of these carts on the southern route between Fort Pitt and Fort Edmonton peaked in 1867 when, according to HBCo records, approximately 200 fully-loaded ox carts used this route.

There is Dominion Land Surveyors' evidence of the location of a trail that began south of Fort Pitt and extended straight west to the



vicinity of Vegreville. It is likely that this route was described by Christie in 1862. He comments about “two small rivers to cross” which could very well have been the first two crossings of the Vermilion River; one near Marwayne and the other north of Mannville.<sup>10</sup> His descriptions of the topography also match the land found along the southern route. On May 13, 1864, the Fort Edmonton post journal recorded: “Carts arrived with goods from below [from Fort Pitt]... the men hauling up the goods and opened some of the bales which had got wet at Vermilion River.”<sup>11</sup> By crossing the Vermilion River the carts had to be travelling all the way from Fort Pitt using the southern trail route.

In 1864 there were several developments that shed more light on trail usage by the HBCo and others. The well-known missionary, John McDougall, who along with his father, George McDougall, had started a mission at Victoria in 1862, confirmed the poor state of the trail on the north side of the river. In 1864 John McDougall decided to do his own freighting of mission supplies. He made the long trip to Red River (Fort Garry) and returned with a small brigade of carts later that summer. He describes how he was able to follow the regular Carlton Trail route as far as Fort Pitt, continue north of the Saskatchewan River for another fifty miles, and then: “We were now about fifty miles or more from the new mission, and had reached the limit of wheel-tracks on the north side of the Saskatchewan...” A few days later, upon reaching the mission, he writes: “Late in the evening of the next day we rolled down the hill into the beautiful valley of the Saskatchewan at Victoria, ours the first carts to ascend the north side of that great river so far west as this point.”<sup>12</sup> Obviously there was no established cart trail for the last fifty miles of his journey. It also is very clear, during this period, that the normal cart trail was on the south side of the river and the more forested area north of the river was not particularly amenable to cart traffic.

This use of the southern trail saw some deviation in 1865 when HBCo Fort Edmonton records noted that: “Two men arrived from Fort Pitt, were coming up with carts from Fort Pitt loaded with goods, left all at Fr. Lacombe’s mission as they could not cross the River there and did not know the road to Victoria. We shall have to send carts for these things now.”<sup>13</sup> This is the first reference to the company using carts on a route north of the river, even though it was only partially on that side of the river. Father Albert Lacombe’s



mission was started in April, 1865 at a site close to the present community of Brosseau, just north of the Saskatchewan. Known as Saint Paul des Cris, this mission was an attempt by Father Lacombe to guide the Crees towards an agricultural existence. Perhaps the HBCo’s freighters were deviating from the normal trail in order to drop off goods at this community. In 1866, when the leader of an ox cart brigade arrived at Fort Edmonton on September 13, he reported that he had left a horse at Father Lacombe’s mission.<sup>14</sup> It would appear that this brigade had travelled on the north side of the river from Fort Pitt as far as Lacombe’s mission and then crossed to the south side. Perhaps this was now an alternate route. In this instance the actual intended route is not clear.

The Edmonton post journal recorded that approximately 200 cart loads of goods arrived at the fort that year; the southern trail was now quite heavily travelled.<sup>15</sup>

The corridor between Fort Pitt and Edmonton, a fertile parkland area, was considered to be Cree territory. However, the Blackfoot would sometimes challenge this contention and there was often inter-tribal strife as a result. As early as 1845 when Sir Henry James Warre took this route he noted that many people at Fort Pitt were in great dread of the “Slave” (Blackfoot) Indians along this trail. About fifteen years later, when preparing to cross the same area, one of the Overlander parties of 1862 took special precautions, such as keeping their guns loaded and primed at all times.<sup>16</sup>

The HBCo and its employees were normally exempt from aggression by the Blackfoot, but during the 1860s there were several instances

Fort Edmonton is seen here in 1886. The main buildings are near the river, while at right is the home of chief factor Richard Hardisty.

where this was not so. In 1866 and 1867 there were a number of serious incidents in which war parties of the Blackfoot Confederacy directly threatened HBCo employees or Metis freemen contracted to the company when they ventured out into the plains south and east of Edmonton. For example, on October 31, 1866, the Edmonton post journal recorded that the Blackfoot stole several cart loads of dried meat and other provisions from a HBCo party and were reported to have seriously threatened the group's lives.<sup>17</sup> However, the Blackfoot seldom crossed to the north side of the North Saskatchewan and both the Crees and the Company felt safer there.

During the early and middle 1860s, when HBCo freight traffic was using the southern trail, the carts would first cross the river at Fort Pitt. The freight would be unloaded from the carts, carried over in a crossing boat and then re-loaded on the southern bank. Upon reaching Fort Edmonton the goods were unloaded and again taken across the river to the north bank using a boat. Beginning in 1866, the company started using a better fording spot than the one directly opposite Fort Edmonton. Carts began to cross to the north side of the river at a point close to the present site of Fort Saskatchewan, just upstream of the mouth of the Sturgeon River. This ford became known as the "Sturgeon River Crossing." In addition to this being a better spot to ford the river, it may also have been chosen to get the cart brigades out of reach of Blackfoot raiding parties for at least part of the trip from Fort Pitt.

In 1867 trader Richard Hardisty was put in charge of a contract with Meade & Company to begin cutting a cart road from Edmonton to Victoria on the north side of the river.<sup>18</sup> In July, 1868, a freight hauler, Phillip Tate, reported that the cart road was now completed. From that point forward, there is no evidence that the HBCo continued to use the southern trail. Perhaps it was occasionally used by others travelling to and from Fort Pitt, but it is likely that the continued aggressive acts by Blackfoot parties would have discouraged this. The route of the Carlton Trail on the north side of the Saskatchewan was now clearly in use. This would remain an important route for several decades as settlers began to put down roots in the area northeast of Edmonton. Evidence of the southern trail route from Fort Pitt west to the Vegreville area soon began to fade.

It is apparent that the southern trail from Fort Pitt to Edmonton had a relatively short life, approximately 1861 to 1867, as a freighting

route for the Hudson's Bay Company. Records in the Fort Edmonton post journals indicate that as many as 500 to 1,000 loaded carts travelled the trail during these years. This volume of traffic would have left significant marks in the prairie soil.

In 1870 after the Canadian government purchased Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company, it passed the Dominion Lands Act in 1872, setting out the government's approach to regulating settlement of this land. Dominion Land Surveyors were hired and sent across the prairies, beginning in Manitoba and working their way westward. In 1879 some fundamental survey work was done in what is now the province of Alberta and by 1882 surveyors were beginning outline surveys. This work involved running the north-south and east-west lines to create township blocks six miles by six miles square. By 1884 much of the so-called "fertile belt" of the prairies had been surveyed into these township-sized blocks. Further sub-division into sections and quarter sections took many more years to complete.

The surveyors recorded their findings in a very standardized format, using preprinted field notebooks. They kept a detailed record of important features of the land they surveyed; vegetation, sloughs, lakes, creeks, rivers, soil types, and cart trails. These notebooks are now in the Provincial Archives of Alberta and on-line from a provincial government website. In them, any feature, such as the location of old cart trails, can be referenced and their locations plotted on a current map. In 1886 the government also published books containing descriptions of each of the hundreds of townships outlined by the surveyors. These books, when referenced, yield valuable information as to the existence and general location of features such as old trails. When coupled with the more detailed records in the surveyors' field notebooks, a reliable and accurate map can be drawn.

The corridor between Fort Pitt and Edmonton was initially surveyed between 1882 and 1884. The surveyors' observations of trail locations, taken from their field notebooks, have been plotted on a map presented here. The observations show a fairly clear pattern, trail remnants suggesting an east-west trail stretching from the vicinity of Fort Pitt to an area northwest of Vegreville. West of present-day Vegreville there were a large number of other trails identified but the uniqueness of each trail route was lost. For example, several surveyors noted the location of the "Battleford to Edmonton Trail" in that

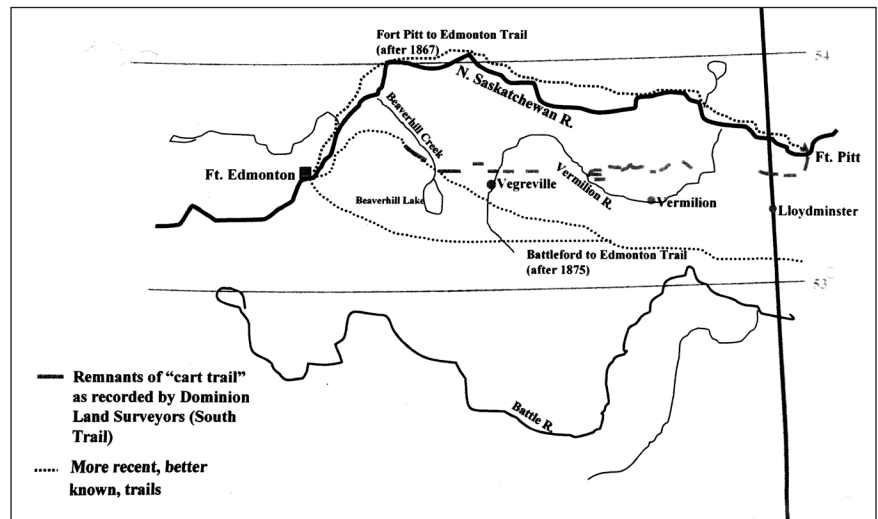


general location but since Battleford came into existence in 1876 it is quite logical for this trail to be noted, for in the 1882 to 1884 period it would have been used to accommodate frequent traffic between those two important centres.

However, when surveyors noted the trail remnants along the likely route from Fort Pitt to Edmonton they made general observations such as “cart trail,” “old trail,” or “Indian cart trail.” None of these surveyors attached a name to the observed remnants nor did they identify them as belonging to an old Fort Pitt to Edmonton route. Why did these surveyors record only scattered remnants of trails when they did their survey work approximately fifteen years later? This was in contrast to the observations made when they encountered the trails that were still in use at that time. For example, surveyor Edgar Bray in 1884 noted that “The Fort Pitt and Edmonton trail passes diagonally through this township...”<sup>19</sup> This was the northern route of the trail running just north of the North Saskatchewan River. Most surveyors would probably have been unaware of the previous existence of an important trail in the southern corridor between Forts Pitt and Edmonton.<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly, the pattern of trail remnants by surveyors does not follow the route of the southern trail as shown on Palliser’s map. Were these remnants the actual location of the HBCo’s ox cart trail used to freight trade goods to Fort Edmonton?

Prairie grasslands and parkland landscapes soon begin to revegetate disturbances like trails. Within a period of a few years a cart trail would have begun to disappear as grass and bushes filled in the wheel ruts with new growth. The map shows that old trail remnants were found intermittently by the surveyors. As part of their work these surveyors faithfully recorded soil types. When the observed trail locations are correlated with soil types, it turns out that approximately 90 per cent of these trail remnants were found in sandy or semi-sandy soil where vegetation does not grow as quickly. Therefore, cart wheel tracks would have persisted longer in sandy conditions and, even after fifteen years of no usage, the trail would still be noticeable in those locations. Most of the wheel ruts in other soil types would already have become quite indistinct and could easily have escaped the notice of the surveyors. The faded nature of the trail reinforces the possibility that these remnants had once been part of the old HBCo southern trail and had fallen into disuse.



In 1999 directional and interpretive signs were installed along the 58-kilometre length of the portion of the Carlton Trail which ran from Victoria Settlement to the vicinity of Redwater, on the north side of the North Saskatchewan River. While it is appropriate to commemorate the overland route of this important piece of the historic Carlton Trail, one might ask about the southern route, stretching 300 kilometres from Fort Pitt to Edmonton. There is no evidence of any sort of commemoration of this route taken by Hudson’s Bay Company ox carts hauling trade goods and other freight to Fort Edmonton. Residents of the communities along this corridor do not appear to be aware of the history that exists in this part of their back yards and therefore cannot duplicate the local pride that is so evident in the commemoration of the Victoria Trail. Perhaps it is time for more public information, such as interpretive signs and plaques, to capture the memory of this old fur trade route.

The likely route of the south trail is indicated by the remnants of a cart trail as recorded by Dominion Land Surveyors.

Paul Sutherland, who currently lives in Calgary, is retired from thirty-five years living and working in Fort McMurray. He is interested in all aspects of Canadian prairie history, but most particularly any lesser known historical incidents prior to the arrival of the Mounted Police.

NOTES

- 1 Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Edmonton Correspondence Books 1857-1868, B.60/b/2, microform reel 1M181.
- 2 Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, Edmonton Report, 1862 HBCA B.60/e/10, fo.1d.
- 3 Southesk, James, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains: a diary and narrative of travel, sport, and adventure during a journey through the Hudson’s Bay Company’s territories in 1859 and 1860*, Toronto, J. Campbell (1875), 141.

- 4 Simpson, Sir George, *Narrative of a Journey Around The World – during the years 1841 and 1842*, London, Henry Colburn, 1847, 97.
- 5 Palliser, John, *Exploration-British North America: The journals, detailed reports, and observations relative to the exploration, by Captain Palliser, of that portion of British North America, which, in latitude, lies between the British boundary line and the height of land or watershed of the northern or frozen ocean respectively, and in longitude between the western shore of Lake Superior and the Pacific Ocean during the years 1857, 1858, 1859 and 1860: Presented to both Houses of Parliament by command of her majesty*, London, 1863, 132.
- 6 McGregor, J.G., *Edmonton Trader*, 1963.
- 7 Russell, R.C., *The Carlton Trail*, 1971.
- 8 The Snake Hills are located near the present community of Saddle Lake, north of the Saskatchewan River, approximately halfway between Fort Pitt and Edmonton. See Barr, William, *Dr. John Roe's Telegraph Survey, St. Paul Minnesota to Quesnel, British Columbia, 1864*, *Manitoba History*, vol. 38, Autumn/Winter 1999-2000, 2.
- 9 Silversides, Brock, *Fort de Prairies: the Story of Fort Edmonton*, Heritage House Publishing Company Ltd., 2005, 58.
- 10 Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Edmonton Report, 1862 HBCA B.60/e/10, fo.1d.
- 11 Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Edmonton Post Journals 1862-1871, B.60/3/33-37, microform reel 1M151.
- 12 McDougall, John, *Saddle, Sled and Snowshoe*, 1896, 179-87.
- 13 Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Edmonton Correspondence Books 1863-1864, B.60/b/l, microform reel 1M180.
- 14 Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Edmonton Post Journals 1862-1871, B.60/3/33-37, microform reel 1M151
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Wade, Mark S., *The Overlanders of 62*, 1931, C.F Banfield, King's Printer, 68.
- 17 Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Edmonton Post Journals 1862-1871, B.60/3/33-37, microform reel 1M151.
- 18 Glenbow Archives, Hardisty Fonds, General Papers -1867-1868, Accession Number M477-36.
- 19 Government of Canada, *Descriptions of the Townships of the North-West Territories, West of the Fourth Meridian*, Ottawa, 1886.
- 20 Each Dominion Land Surveyor was required to complete an affidavit swearing to the accuracy and integrity of his work. Each field notebook contains one of these affidavits, which includes the home address of the surveyor. The majority of these home addresses were recorded in either Manitoba, Ontario or Quebec. In general, these early surveyors were not particularly familiar with the geography and history of the prairies as far west as Forts Pitt and Edmonton.