

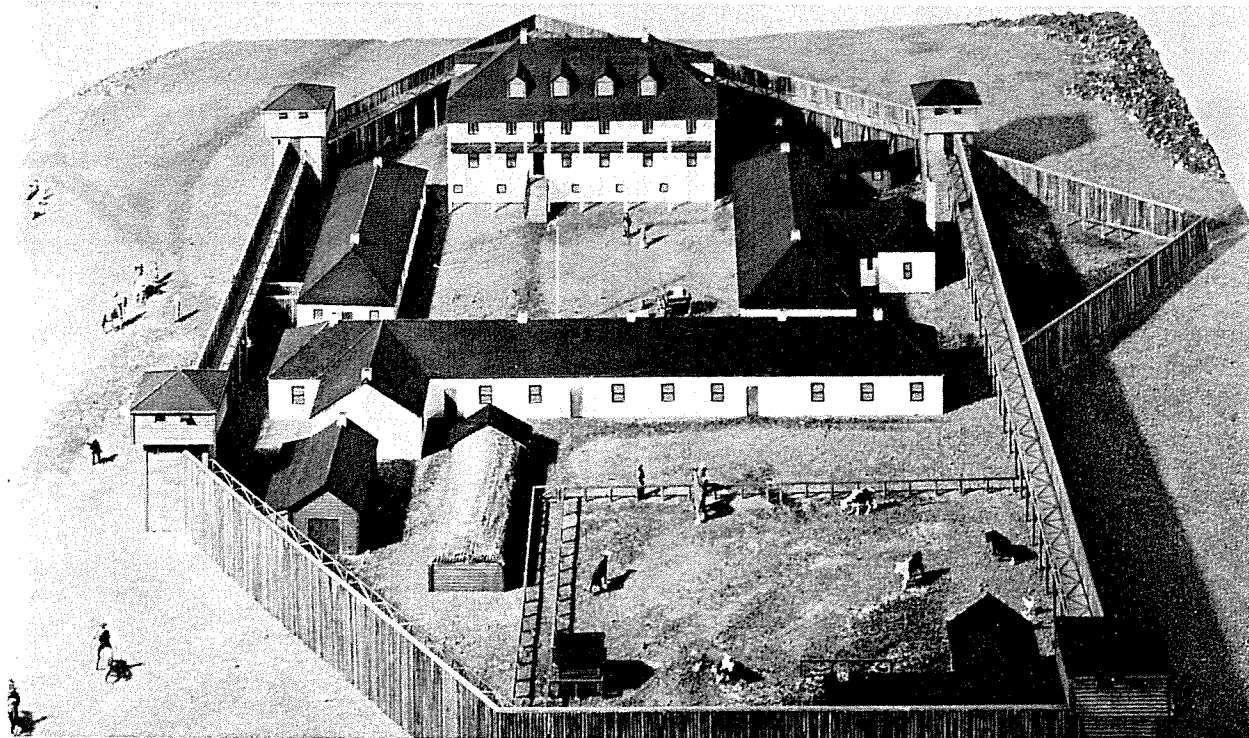


# FORT EDMONTON

DEVELOPMENT OF A FUR TRADE CENTRE



PROVINCIAL MUSEUM & ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA, 12845 - 102 AVENUE, EDMONTON, ALBERTA, CANADA



*View of the Model of Fort Edmonton*

### Introduction

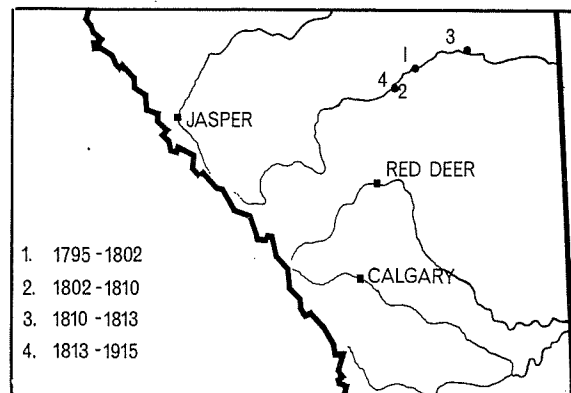
The model of Fort Edmonton, which greets the visitor upon entering the Fur Trade Gallery, represents only one in a series of posts established by the Hudson's Bay Company along the North Saskatchewan River, and named Fort Edmonton. The development of the Forts Edmonton was linked directly to the expanding fur trade activity in the Northwest and contributed to the opening up of the western areas to settlement.

Until the 1780's the fur trade activity along the Saskatchewan River had been confined mainly to the area that is now Saskatchewan. However, by 1790 the demand for furs necessitated an expansion to new areas farther west. Consequently, in 1792, both the North West Co. and the Hudson's Bay Co. erected posts near present day Elk Point, Alberta. These posts were named Fort George and Buckingham House. For eight years they helped to supply the demand for furs and the provisions which further northwest explorations required. By 1795, however, the resources around these two posts were becoming depleted. Duncan McGillivray, writing from the North West Co.'s post of Fort George in 1795, stated "The country around Ft. George is now entirely ruined."

Because of this situation, McGillivray and Angus Shaw drew up plans to construct a new establishment near the confluence of the Sturgeon and North Saskatchewan rivers, across from present

day Fort Saskatchewan. This post was completed in the fall of 1795 and named Fort Augustus, with Angus Shaw in charge.

The construction of the new post had been kept a secret from the Hudson's Bay Co. However, William Tomison, in charge of Buckingham House, upon hearing of the new establishment set about to erect a post beside Fort Augustus in competition with the North West Co. Because of the lateness of the season when construction was started, and the lack of building materials, the post was not completed until the spring of 1796. The new establishment was named Edmonton House.



*Fig. 1 Locations and dates of the Forts Edmonton*

## The Forts Edmonton

The first Fort Edmonton was probably not as large as the later posts. William Tomison writing to George Sutherland in December, 1795, described the establishment—"Edmonton House . . . is 60 feet in length, 24 in breadth and 17 high, but have only been able to stockade the front and one side. All the wood was rafted down by water, there being no wood near where the house was erected. We have also built another house of 32 by 18 and 16 feet high." The name Edmonton was derived from the town of that name in Middlesex, England, which was the home of Sir John Lake, the Deputy Governor of the Hudson's Bay Co.

The two posts remained in this location until 1802 when, because of lack of wood for fuel and building materials it was decided to move farther upriver. The new site chosen was near the present Power House at the entrance to the 105th Street Bridge in the City of Edmonton. Both companies retained the names of the old establishments. At this new location the Forts Edmonton and Augustus, while remaining the center of the fur trade activity for the area, now became the provisioning depot and departing point for the fur brigades moving into the northwest. As well as furs, a large trade was carried on in buffalo meat and pemmican. Rocky Mountain House to the west, and Forts Assiniboine, Wedderburn, and Chipewyan in the north all depended on Forts Edmonton and Augustus to supply them with the provisions needed to maintain these northern posts. Records indicate that barley was planted and large gardens were cultivated to supply vegetables.

In 1810 the two posts were again moved, this time some sixty-five miles down river to the mouth of the White Earth Creek near present day Smoky Lake. While retaining the old names the posts were also referred to as "Terre Blanche" and "Fort White Earth." The posts remained in this location for three years, continuing to collect the furs, supply the needs of the local Indian tribes, and provide provisions for northern outposts. From this point onward we have some knowledge of what the posts looked like. During the summer of 1968 and 1969 archaeological excavations under the direction of the Provincial Museum and Archives of Alberta were carried out at the White Earth location. As a result of this research, the investigators were able to determine the extent of the two posts which were contained within one common stockade (figure 2).

In 1813, however, the two companies decided to abandon this site and return to the "Power House" location which would more adequately serve their needs. Once again the two companies shared a common stockade for purposes of defense (figure 3). They remained so until 1821 when the two companies merged under the heading of The Hudson's Bay Co. The North West Co.'s Fort Augustus was not immediately abandoned, however, as it was needed to house the large number of people and provisions now coming to the post.

The year 1821 saw a change of pace in the fur trade activity. No longer was there the competition for furs by rival companies. The Hudson's Bay Co. settled down to a program of consolidation of its resources and facilities.

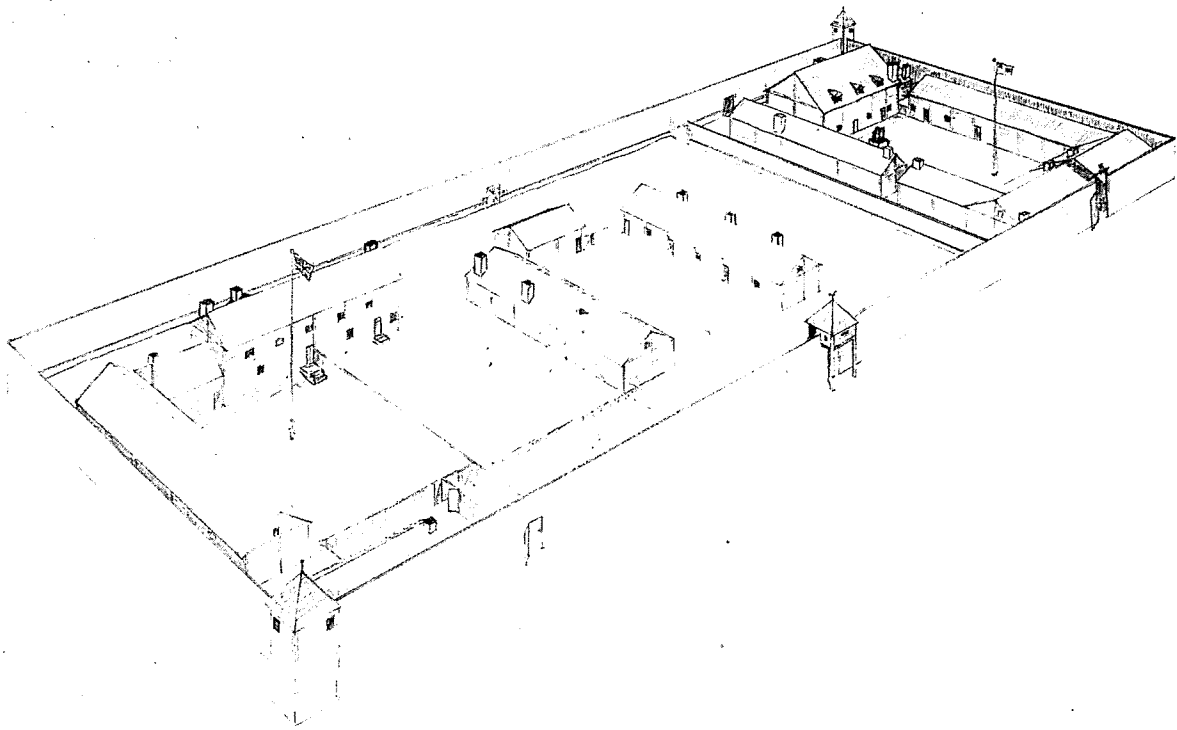


Fig. 2 Fort Edmonton-Fort Augustus, 1810-1813, from an artist's conception

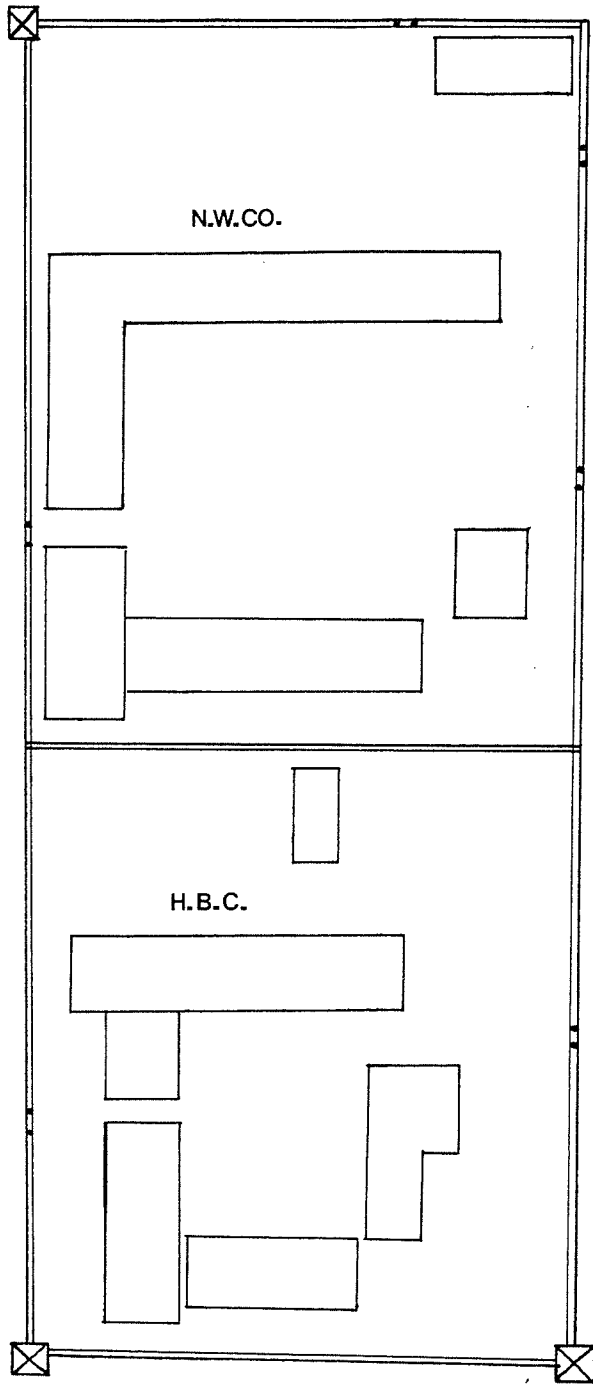


Fig. 3 Fort Edmonton-Fort Augustus, 1814

In 1830 the location of Fort Edmonton was moved for the final time. Because of the problems of flooding on the low flats the fort was moved to higher ground immediately below the present Legislative Buildings. John Rowand, who was appointed Chief Factor in charge of the Saskatchewan District in 1823, supervised the building of the fort and of the large house known as "Rowand's Folly" shown in the 1846 Vavasour plan (figure 4).

By 1861 the fort had again become inadequate for the needs of the growing trade and commerce carried on there. It was enlarged and the result is shown in the 1861 plan (figure 5).

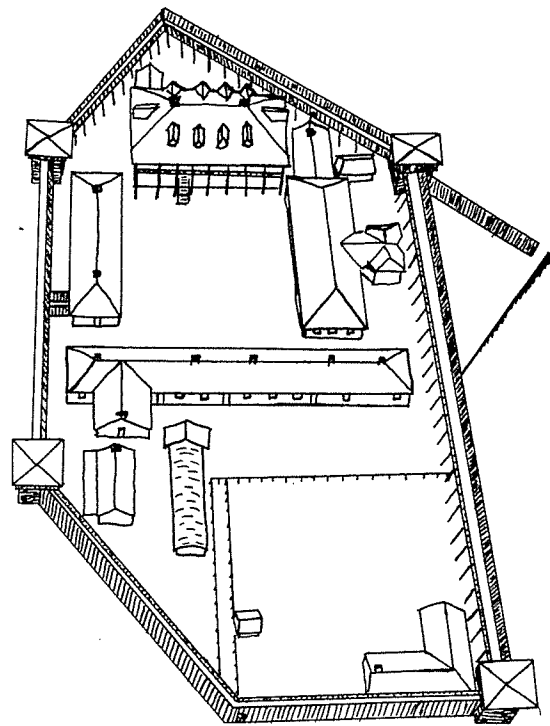


Fig. 4 Fort Edmonton—1846 "Vavasour" plan

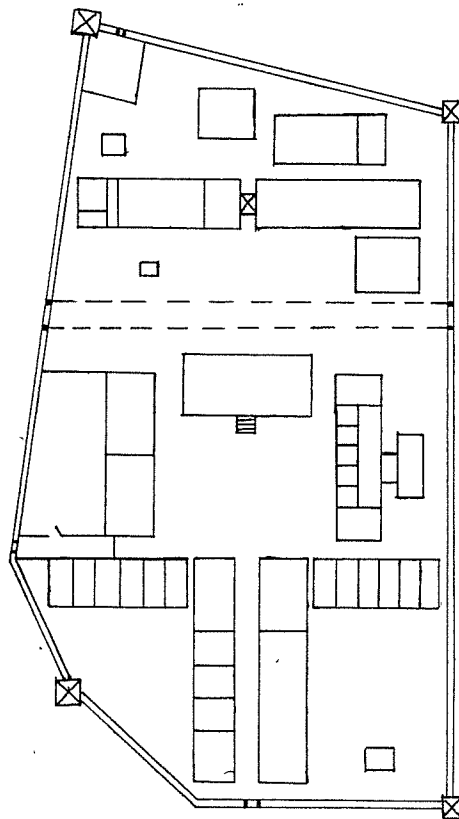


Fig. 5 Fort Edmonton, 1861

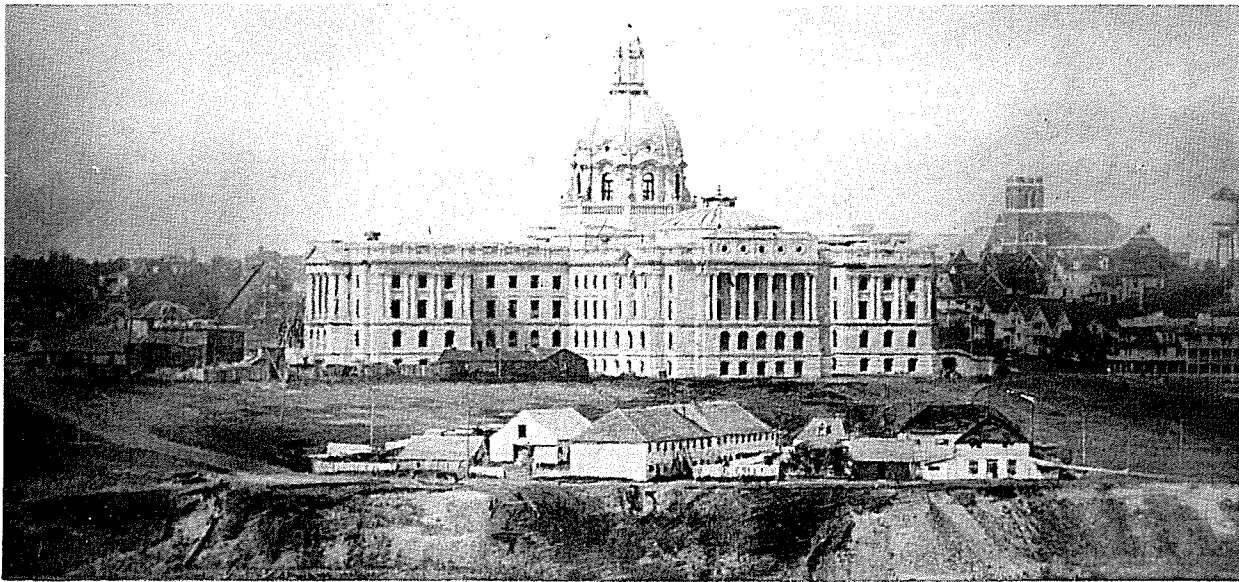


Fig. 6 Fort Edmonton, 1914, with Legislative Buildings in background

### Importance of Fort Edmonton in the Fur Trade

Fort Edmonton, which started as a trading post, grew to become a strategic center for the vast Saskatchewan District reaching from Cumberland House to the Rocky Mountains. It was the main center of trade for seven Indian tribes. The Cree and Assiniboine lived and traded in the area year around while the tribes of Blackfoot, Sarcee, Gros Ventre, Piegan and Bloods came periodically to trade. As well as furs, these groups brought buffalo meat for pemmican, which was made at the fort for distribution to the northern outposts. In 1863 Milton and Cheadle wrote of the fort—“The establishment of Edmonton is the most important one in the Saskatchewan district, . . . It boasts of a windmill, a blacksmith’s forge and a carpenter’s shop. The boats required for the annual voyage to York Factory in Hudson’s Bay are built and mended here; carts, sleighs and harness made and all appliances required for the companies traffic between the different posts.”

### Activities at the Post

When Paul Kane, the wandering artist, visited Fort Edmonton in 1847 he recorded the population at 130 souls including men, women and children. A major industry was boat building which employed a good number of men—building the York boats for the fur brigades which travelled the Saskatchewan River. Other activities which kept the men busy were buffalo hunting and cutting fire wood, tending the gardens and repairing the buildings. Another large scale activity was the raising of pack horses for the overland brigades and sled dogs for winter travel. A good deal of fur trading was also carried on. In the early days of the fort, trading was done at the gate. Later, however, small parties were permitted to enter and trade at the store.

The women were also busy. Moccasins and clothing had to be made for the men and the buffalo meat had to be made into pemmican.

As the nineteenth century closed, the days of the great fur brigades came to an end. With improved methods of transportation and food production the usefulness of Fort Edmonton came to an end. The growing city of Edmonton was beginning to envelop the fort. In 1915 the final chapter in the history of Fort Edmonton came to an end when the remaining buildings were dismantled. The fort which had stood astride the voyageurs highway and dominated the western fur trade scene for one hundred and twenty years passed into history.

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