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Fort Simpson, on the Northwest Coast

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FORT SIMPSON, ON THE NORTHWEST COAST

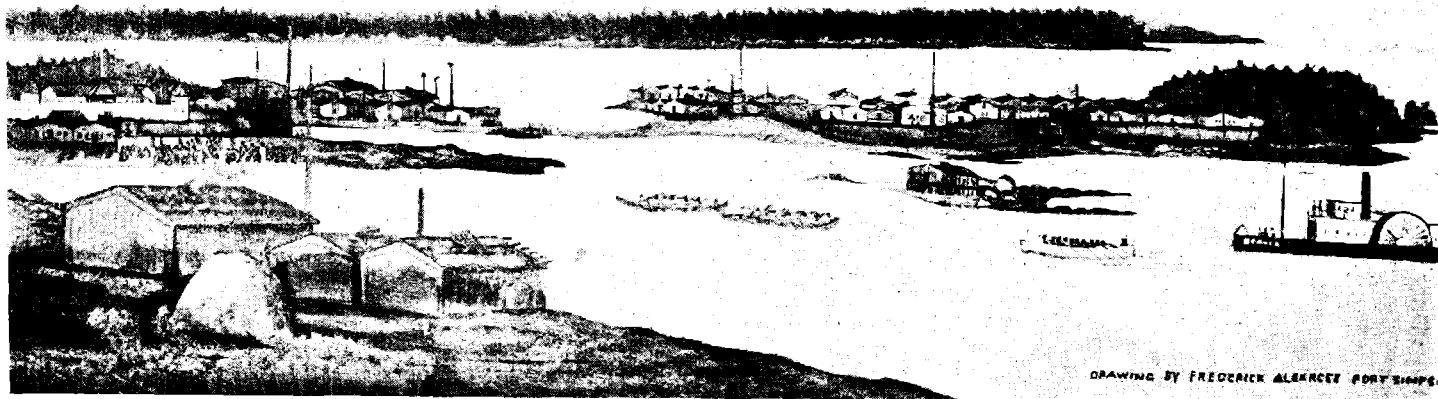
BY

MARIUS BARBEAU

Among the west-coast establishments of the Hudson's Bay Company in the first part of the nineteenth century, only the trading post at Victoria was comparable in importance with that at Fort Simpson, which was situated near the mouths of the Nass and Skeena rivers, below the present Alaskan boundary, at the place now called Port Simpson.

Fort Simpson was founded about 1833 under the direction of John Work, and later placed under Peter Skene Ogden. It was intended to replace the fort on the Nass, then disestablished—like that of Millbank—on account of its unfavourable situation. The other forts along the coast at that date were those of Talkoo (Taku) and Stickeen (later named Fort Wrangel), in Alaska; and those of Rupert and Victoria, to the south of Fort Simpson. A trading post was also maintained at Bella Bella.

Fort Simpson served as a fur-trading centre for many Indian tribes—the Tsimshian nations (Niska, Gitksan and Tsimshian proper) of the Nass and Skeena rivers and the adjacent coast, the Haidas of



DRAWING BY FREDERICK ALEXANDER FORT SIMPSON

Fort Simpson

Queen Charlotte and Prince of Wales islands, the Tlingit of the Alaskan coast, and some other tribes to the south. The coast natives were warlike and fairly numerous; long-standing feuds between them often resulted in bloody encounters. Clashes between the Haidas, when they visited the fort, and the Tsimshian proper, more than once created an awkward situation for the officers of the company, whose aim was to promote peace for the benefit of their trade. Conspiracies and outbreaks among the ten tribes of the Tsimshian proper—about 2,500 strong—then permanently stationed around the fort, brought matters to an impasse, and when they tried to burn the fort, about 1855, the guns in the corner bastions were fired and a few cedar planks were crushed in the deserted Indian houses on the peninsula just opposite. Peace was soon patched up, however, and the friendly relations desired by both sides resumed. Ammunition for the old eight pounders in the bastions being scarce, the chief trader would pay a shilling for each cannon ball found around the plank houses and returned to the fort for further use if occasion required it. To this day the Port Simpson Tsimshians have remembered with humour the premium placed on recovered gun ammunition.

Many interesting episodes of early life at the fort and among the Indians have been related in print (cf. Aretander's *The Apostle of Alaska*, Crosby's *Among the Ankomenums* and Collison's *In the Wake of the War Canoe*); various manuscripts also contain abundant information.¹

The following description of the fort as it stood in 1859 is taken from a manuscript of the Bancroft Collection, entitled *Forts and Fort Life in New Caledonia under Hudson's Bay Company Regime, by Pym's Nevins Compton (Victoria, 1878)*.

The fort was built on the same model as those of Rupert and Victoria; the only difference was in size, that of Victoria being larger and with more buildings. The palisaded enclosure at Fort Simpson, about two hundred feet square, surrounded several buildings, a well and a garden (cf. Ill., Compton's plan).

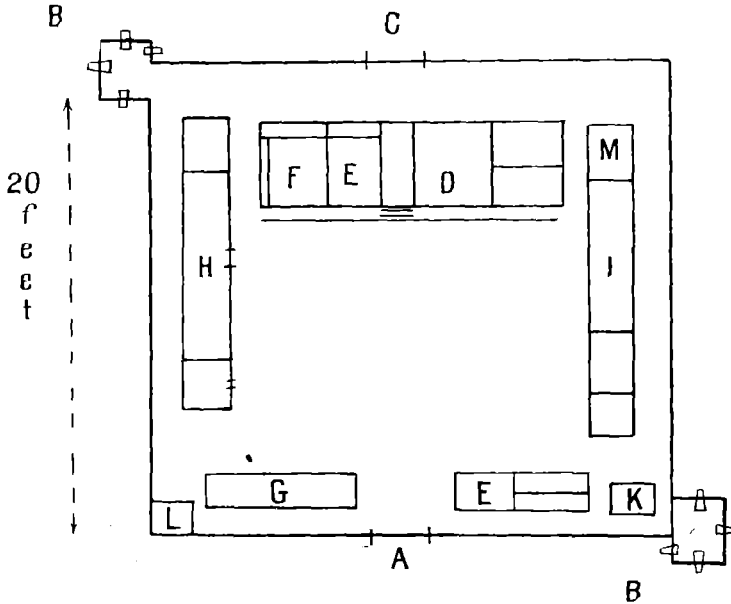
The houses and stores, two stories high, with shingle roofs, were built of logs ten to twelve inches square. The doors and sashes were painted and the walls whitewashed.

One of the most interesting features of the establishment, naturally, was the palisade. It was composed of pickets and a bastion "at each corner"—according to Compton's MS.—or rather, as shown in the plan, at two corners diagonally opposite. In each bastion stood four guns, old eight pounders.

The gates were massive structures about six or seven inches thick, studded with large nails, to guard against their being cut down

¹ Particularly that most voluminous diary, covering about half a century, written by a native convert—Clah-Wellington—and recently sold by his heirs to a curio collector in England.

by the natives. There were small doors within so as to admit only one person at a time. A small box for the gate keeper stood near the front gate.



Pym's Nevins Compton's plan of Fort Simpson (1859). A, front entrance; BB, bastions, 4 guns each; C, back entrance; D, commanding officer's quarters; E, mess room; FF, officers' quarters; G, trade shop; H, warehouse; I, men's houses; K, blacksmith's shop; L, carpenter's shop; M, kitchen.

The pickets surrounding the establishment were of cedar, about twenty-two feet long by nine to twelve inches thick; they were square laterally to prevent bullets from passing between, sunk four feet deep in the ground, and attached to cross pieces, about four feet from the top, by means of wooden pegs or oblique notches (*cf.* Ill., from Compton's diagram). The ends of these cross pieces, about fifteen feet long, were mortised into stouter pickets called "King posts."

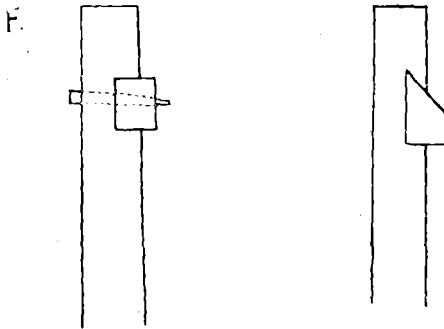
An inside gallery, according to the same description, ran around the whole enclosure of pickets at about four feet from the top, and afforded "a capital promenade and a means of seeing everything." It was reached by staircases giving separate entrance to the upper bastions, which were octagonal and loopholed for musketry.

A regular watch was kept all night in a small turret, surmounted by the flag staff, over the gate. Every half hour the call "All's well!" was repeated in nautical fashion.

THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Fort Simpson, in Compton's own words, was "a typical fort, well kept, well built, and one of the finest on the coast." Captain McNeil was in charge at that time (1859) and the personnel consisted of thirteen other men, Orkneys, French-Canadians and Norwegians. The steamer *Beaver*, replaced later by the *Labouchère*, served all the posts along the west coast.

We are indebted to an old Tsimshian native, Frederick Alexksee, for a pictorial reconstruction of the Indian village of Port Simpson—named *Lahkwaw-Kalamps*, "Place-of-Wild-roses," in Tsimshian—



Pickets and cross-pieces and method of attachment.

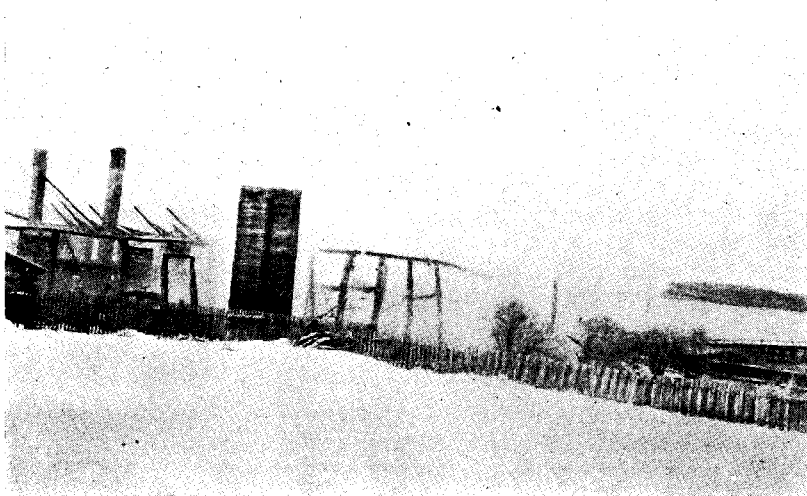
the totem poles and the fort (at the left hand corner of the illustration here reproduced) as they stood within the recollection of a few old men still surviving.

The only two buildings that remained of the old trading post—a Hudson's Bay Company store and house—were destroyed by fire in the winter of 1915, when the author was engaged in ethnographic research among the adjacent Indians, now reduced in number to about four hundred (*cf.* two photographs taken during, and after, the fire). A modern store privately owned has since occupied the site of the old fort, every vestige of which has now disappeared, and it is only a matter of years before the exact location of the structure and its various features will become a matter of doubt and controversy. No time, therefore, should be lost before commemorating by some permanent inscription this interesting landmark of the early days on the northwest coast.

ANNUAL REPORT, 1923



The last remaining buildings of the Hudson's Bay Co.'s post destroyed by fire in the winter of 1915. (Photo by the author.)



After the fire.