



*A water-colour of Fort Vancouver as it appeared in 1846-47, ten years after the arrival of the Reverend Herbert Beaver and his wife. The divided dwelling house where the Beavers were sheltered was behind the artist, Lieutenant T. P. Coode, as he sketched the scene.*

## ‘UNPRETENDING’ BUT NOT ‘INDECENT’

### Living Quarters at Mid-19th Century HBC Posts

BY JOHN A. HUSSEY

THE REVEREND HERBERT BEAVER arrived at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River with great expectations. From discussions with directors and officials of the Hudson’s Bay Company in London he had received the impression that, as the newly appointed chaplain at the Company’s western headquarters, he would be assigned a dwelling of his own and would be made as snug and comfortable as a typical parish clergyman in England.

Great was the disappointment of Mr and Mrs Beaver, therefore, when they landed from the Company’s barque, *Nereide*, on 6 September 1836, and found that no preparations had been made to shelter them. They were placed in one end of a house with only a thin partition between them and other noisy occupants. Two chairs and a table were hastily assembled for the new-comers, but the chaplain had to superintend the making of a bedstead, while Mrs Beaver put together a mattress. The Beavers complained bitterly to Company officers not

only about their own accommodations but about living conditions at the post in general. Lodging for all classes, Beaver wrote to London, was ‘indecent’.

The protests of the prejudiced and hypercritical Mr Beaver can generally be discounted, but he was undoubtedly correct in indicating that his lodgings at Fort Vancouver were Spartan in their simplicity. William H. Gray, member of an American missionary party which reached the depot soon after the Beavers, found the parsonage to be constructed of wood, with rough board partitions and bare, unplanned floors. There were no carpets in the country except Indian mats, and these Mrs Beaver considered ‘too filthy to step upon, or to be about the house.’

Gray and other visitors to Fort Vancouver, while not confirming Beaver’s description of the living accommodations as ‘indecent’, did make clear that the quarters of officers, clerks, and other employees of all grades were, on the whole, extremely plain. Gray, speaking of the dwellings in general, recorded that in 1836 the partitions in the hewn timber structures were ‘all upright boards planed, and the cracks battened; floors were mostly rough boards, except [those in] the office and the governor’s house, which were planed.’

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*Quotations from the HBC Archives are made with permission of the Company.*

In 1841 French traveller Eugène Duflot de Mofras found the quarters of the clerks to be 'a kind of barracks, where nothing recalls the comforts of the English.' This opinion was seconded by Assistant Surgeon Silas Holmes of the United States Exploring Expedition who, during the same year, described the houses of the clerks as being unpainted and of the 'plainest possible' construction. Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, the leader of the expedition, was a bit more charitable. Though admitting that the interiors of the same quarters were 'unpretending' and 'simply finished with pine board panels, without any paint', he reported that they were, on the whole, 'as comfortable as could be desired.'

This same simplicity – even austerity – prevailed in the furnishings. For the most part the commissioned officers, clerks, tradesmen, and labourers reached Fort Vancouver after long overland journeys from Hudson Bay or Canada. For such employees to transport household goods in quantities larger than could be contained in several of the ubiquitous small wooden trunks called *cassettes* and a couple of additional bundles was almost entirely out of the question. Therefore the Company provided the basic essentials. From available evidence these furnishings – except perhaps in the manager's residence – were indeed minimal. For those servants below the rank of post master (a rank between interpreter and clerk) they were practically non-existent; such persons generally had to provide their own lodgings and equipment at the Columbia depot.

In 1841 Duflot de Mofras recorded that the rooms of the subordinate officers and clerks each could boast of no more than 'a little table, a chair or bench and a camp bed of boards, infested with insects, with two woolen covers.' Assistant Surgeon Holmes noted that the houses of the clerks contained 'no other furniture than a few stools or wooden bottomed chairs and a coarse pine table.' In those quarters, said Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, 'bunks are built for bedsteads.'

Narcissa Whitman, wife of American missionary Marcus Whitman, vividly described the sleeping facilities at Fort Vancouver as she found them in 1836:

You will ask what kind of beds are used here. I can tell you what kind of bed they made for us after we arrived, & I have since found it a fashionable bed for this country. The bedstead is in the form of a bunk with rough board bottoms, upon which were laid about one dozen of the Indian blankets. These with a pair of pillows covered with calico cases constitute our bed sheets and covering. There are several feather beds in the place, but they are made of the feathers of wild game.

These witnesses did not exaggerate the plainness of the quarters and furnishings for subordinate officers and clerks; this is attested by surviving inventories of Company-owned 'articles in use' in the 'common receptacle of the single officers, called "Bachelor's Hall".' During the spring of 1844, for instance, the seventeen rooms in the clerks' lodgings – and possibly additional rooms as well – contained only the following items supplied by

the firm: 11 wash-hand-basins, 14 beds, 37 chairs, 10 earthenware jugs, 4 wooden sofas, 18 wooden tables, and 7 tablecloths.

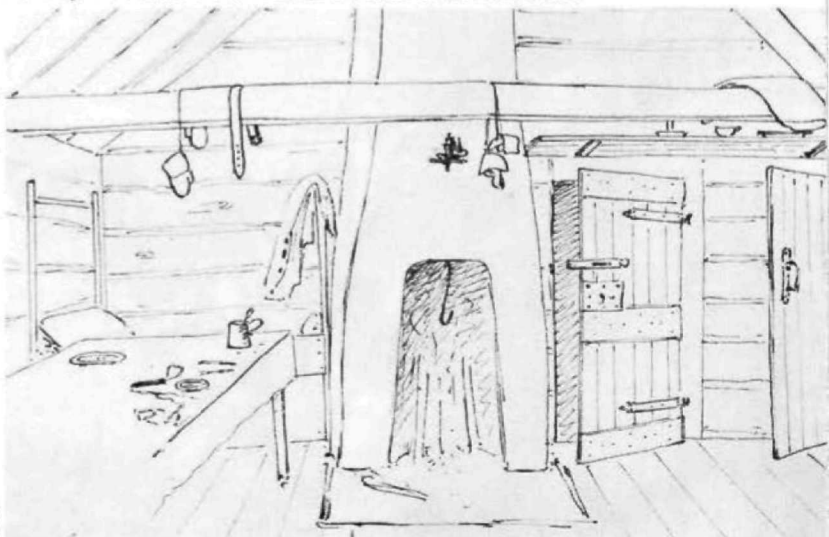
Such touches of decoration as were present were supplied by the 'gentlemen' themselves. John Dunn, a sometime post master at Fort Vancouver, said of the common smoking room in the bachelors' quarters: 'All sorts of weapons, and dresses, and curiosities of civilized and savage life, and of the various implements for the prosecution of the trade, may be seen there.'

The accommodations for clerks and junior officers at Fort Vancouver were not unusually plain for a Hudson's Bay Company post of the mid-nineteenth century. In fact they were considerably more comfortable than those at some of the smaller and more remote establishments. Even at the firm's principal depot in North America, York Factory on Hudson Bay, the clerks' quarters contained only the bare necessities. In an oft-quoted passage from his autobiographic narrative, *Hudson Bay*, clerk Robert M. Ballantyne graphically pictured the rooms in Bachelors' Hall at York as he observed them in 1843:

The first I entered was very small – just large enough to contain a bed, a table and a chest, leaving little room for the occupant to move about in . . . None of these bedrooms were carpeted; none of them boasted of a chair – the trunks and boxes of the persons to whom they belonged answering instead; and none of the beds were graced with curtains. Notwithstanding this emptiness, however, they had a somewhat furnished appearance, from the number of greatcoats, leather capotes, fur caps, worsted sashes, guns, rifles, shot-belts, snow-shoes, and powder-horns with which the walls were profusely decorated.

The lower grades of 'servants' – the tradesmen, *voyageurs*, and labourers – generally lived in quarters possessing still fewer amenities than did those of the clerks. The usual practice throughout the Company's establishments was to house the greater part of the personnel within the fort enclosure when there was one.

*The 'Interior of H. B. Co. Post at Pembina on Red River', a sketch from a series done in Canada between 1838 and 1848.*



In such cases the dwellings of the ordinary workmen were often not unlike military barracks. Robert Ballantyne described one of these men's houses as he found it at Fort Garry during the 1840s.

It was large, and low in the roof, built entirely of wood, which was unpainted . . . The men's beds were constructed after the fashion of berths on board ship, being wooden boxes ranged in tiers round the room. Several tables and benches were strewn miscellaneously about the floor, in the centre of which stood a large double iron stove, with the word "Carron" stamped on it. This served at once for cooking and warming the place. Numerous guns, axes, and canoe-paddles hung round the walls or were piled in corners, and the rafters sustained a miscellaneous mass of materials, the more conspicuous among which were snowshoes, dog-sledges, axe-handles, and nets.

A former carpenter at Fort Ellice left a somewhat similar picture of the servants' quarters at that prairie post about three decades later.

There was the men's house, the mechanics' house, the native servants' and dog drivers' houses, also the married servants' houses, each consisting of one large room.

A door opened into each from the outside and there was no other means of entrance . . . Two tiers of rough bunks round the walls represented sleeping accommodations. A large mud chimney and open fire-place provided ventilation. We did all cooking at the open fireside.

At Fort Qu'Appelle in 1867 there were five dwellings for servants. All were covered by a single roof but separated by log walls carried up to the ridge line. The floors at this post were of planed, tongued and grooved boards, and the walls were 'smoothly plastered with clay

and whitewashed'. Except in the interpreter's quarters at one end of the row, which was ceiled and partitioned into rooms with boards, the beams were open or covered by poles, over which hides were laid to serve as a ceiling. Most of the doors were made of parchment stretched on a frame. They were held shut by wooden latches which were lifted by thongs which passed through the doors. In all but the interpreter's house, where there were glass panes, the windows were covered with parchment. Each dwelling contained an 'immense' fireplace which, recorded Isaac Cowie, was required for lighting as well as heat, since 'tallow was too much in demand in the making of pemmican to permit of its being used luxuriously in making candles merely to light "the men's houses".'

Where there was no danger from Indians the lower grades of employees were sometimes permitted to live outside the fort confines, although it was seldom that a clerk or officer was allowed to do so. Such was the case at Fort Vancouver. Except for a few domestics and other workers whose duties required them to live at their places of employment, all of the 'servants' at the Columbia depot resided in houses of varying sizes and descriptions in or near the 'village', a cluster of dwellings on the plain south and west of the palisaded enclosure.

These structures were not provided by the Company. They were erected by the men themselves at their own expense and during what little free time they had — Sundays and holidays largely. As might be expected,

*The interior of a Métis dwelling as depicted in the Canadian Illustrated News, 1874.*





*The Company house built at the end of the Grand Rapids Tramway in Central Manitoba was an example of 'Red River frame' or posts on the sill construction. Photograph by J.B. Tyrrell, 1890.*

they differed greatly in size and quality. Some were constructed in 'Red River frame' or posts on the sill with the spaces between uprights filled with horizontal squared logs or with planks from two to four inches thick. Others were built in 'American cottage fashion', framed and weatherboarded; a few were of logs; and a number were of slabs from the depot sawmill.

Described by some visitors as 'comfortable' these dwellings were usually one storey high, although some contained one and a half stories. A number were ceiled on the inside, and by 1849 some were even papered. Others had plastered interior walls. Ordinarily they contained two or three rooms, but many consisted of but a single chamber.

A structure of the smaller type, the home of a Company farmer near Fort Vancouver, was described by a visitor of 1841. The house, he noted in his journal, was 'a wretched log hut, containing one room only, about 10 feet square... it contained no other furniture than a pine table and an iron pot; the bed, if it could be called one, consisted of rough pine logs covered by a single blanket... and in this house ate drank and slept the farmer, his wife, their three children and the farm servant.' Here, certainly, was simplicity.

The residences of officers, clerks, post masters, interpreters, and others in positions of some authority were ordinarily distinguished by better construction and

finish from those of the rank and file employees. And the quarters of post managers, be they clerks, chief traders, or chief factors, were sometimes more carefully finished and better furnished than those of the lesser 'gentlemen'. But the difference was often not particularly noticeable, since all of the officers and clerks frequently lived in the same building, particularly at the smaller establishments.

Usually it was only at the major posts and depots, particularly those readily accessible by ship or boat, that the manager's rooms reflected his position of authority and his economic status. The 'Big Houses' at such establishments, said H. M. Robinson, in *The Great Fur Land* tended to contain 'more of the appliances of civilization', and those officers who were so inclined could command the means to 'render themselves very comfortable, especially as changes in appointments occur less frequently at headquarters than elsewhere.'

An observer at Fort Vancouver in 1841 remarked in his journal that the residence of Chief Factor John McLoughlin was 'well furnished.' Several other guests during the 1830s and 1840s expressed their astonishment at finding the mess hall table in the same dwelling graced by 'elegant queen's ware' and 'glittering glasses and decanters.' It is known that there was a 'sofa' in McLoughlin's study as early as 1836, although whether it was one of the 'Wooden Sofas' listed in depot

inventories or one belonging to the chief factor personally remains undetermined.

In 1840 Letitia Hargrave, wife of the chief factor at York Factory, took great satisfaction in describing her sitting room, furnished with tables, a dark carpet, a sofa, her husband's large desk, and her piano. The curtains at the windows were held back by six curtain pins shaped 'like so many sunflowers magnified'. Mrs Hargrave admitted that these pins, when they arrived in the annual shipment of invoiced goods from London, had been destined for a lady at Red River. But, she owned, 'we seized them.' With such autocratic power, it is little wonder that the factors at major depots got the best of everything.

Such comforts seem to have been the exception rather than the rule, even at the larger posts. American traveller Thomas Jefferson Farnham observed in 1839 that the mess hall in the Big House at Fort Vancouver was 'ceiled with pine above and at the sides', seeming to imply that this important room was unpainted at that time. Heating in the dining hall was provided by a 'large close stove'. No fireplace was mentioned.

Inventories of 'articles in use' in the Fort Vancouver pantry for 1844 and 1845 include such items as earthenware dishes, ivory-handled knives and forks, earthenware and block-tin soup tureens, Britannia metal ladles and spoons, steel-plated spoons, tin tea pots, tin stands for

tea pots, glass tumblers, wine glasses, iron tea kettles, tablecloths, and cruet stands. Except for two 'plated candlesticks' and two 'long brass candlesticks' the articles listed do not provide much evidence of elegance.

A visitor to Fort Simpson on the Northwest Coast as late as 1868 found the main room in the dwelling house furnished with a long table in its centre. 'This' he wrote, 'with a row of chairs along the walls constituted almost the only furniture.' Even at York Factory the winter mess hall, while it could boast of a mahogany table, had only 'country made' chairs, and the floor was uncarpeted.

Describing Christmas dinner in the mess hall at Fort Edmonton – no unimportant post – in 1847, the artist Paul Kane wrote: 'No tablecloth shed its snowy whiteness over the board; no silver candelabra or gaudy china interfered with its simple magnificence. The bright tin plates and dishes reflected jolly faces'. Such testimony makes it clear that graceful appointments and imported furniture were far from universal in the Big Houses of the Company's establishments.

This prevailing simplicity, both in the dwellings of the clerks and the officers, was not entirely a matter of isolation and difficult transportation. Nor was it due only to the fact that many of the 'gentlemen', after years of exposure to frontier conditions and frequent changes of station, became 'somewhat careless' about their domestic surroundings. It was also a result of Company policy. When the Reverend Herbert Beaver complained that the furniture in his quarters at Fort Vancouver was rough and his floors were bare, Chief Factor McLoughlin made a display of indignation at these demands for what he held to be luxuries. 'I consider people ought to satisfy themselves with such things as the country affords' he wrote to the Governor and Committee in London 'and I am Averse to the Introduction of any thing in the country which may lead to unnecessary Expence . . . . If he is Allowed carpets and imported furniture – has not every Gentleman in the place a Right to the same Indulgence.'

The Company's policy was expressed with even greater force by its chief officer in America, Governor Sir George Simpson, when he replied in 1844 to an inquiry from the field as to 'what description of articles are to be furnished from the Depot on Outfits to the Districts for Table Furniture.' He answered as follows:

The Table Appointments throughout the Country have hitherto been upon much too large a scale, far exceeding the consumption of most respectable families in the civilized world, & I think you may safely reduce the usual supplies by 50 p Cent – the descriptions to be of the cheapest, vizt. Tin plates: E ware Cups & Saucers: no table cloths, which with Towels are considered private property. No E ware Dishes: a few Tumblers which answer for Wine glasses. Knives & Forks ought to last at least half a dozen years – in private families they sometimes last 20.

Inventories for subsequent years demonstrate that these instructions, in the Columbia District at least, were



Two large pieces of a blue and white china platter and above the remains of glassware were excavated at Fort Vancouver, Washington in 1966.



not complied with in all respects. 'Luxuries' such as cut glass salt cellars, wine decanters, 'flat E ware Dishes', wine glasses, and 'Diaper table Cloths' continued to appear on pantry inventories at Fort Vancouver during the several subsequent years for which those records are available.

Despite the abundant evidence to the contrary, there are romantics who still foster the notion that chief factors lived with all the grace and elegant surroundings of wealthy West Indian planters. An early champion of this idea was Pacific Northwest Historian Clinton A. Snowden, who repeated as gospel the legend that Chief Factor McLoughlin maintained a 'sort of medieval state' at the Columbia depot, with a kilted guard to attend his door and a 'highland piper in his tartans who strode up and down the great dining hall at meal times.'

'A certain standard of life was observed at the posts' wrote the knowledgeable Margaret Arnett MacLeod, editor of *The Letters of Letitia Hargrave*. 'Table service was important, and heads of districts usually had their monogrammed silver, and plate chests, and there was crystal on their tables . . . Angelique McKenzie's monogrammed silver is hallmarked 1830, and the silver tea service that graced her table at Isle a la Crosse is now in the beautiful Toronto home of a descendant.'

The late Dr Burt Brown Barker, the great student of the life of Dr John McLoughlin, was a devoted exponent of the gracious living theory. 'At Fort Vancouver' he wrote, ' . . . McLoughlin could make an unusually fine display with the dining table and chairs, probably twenty-four in number, which the Hudson's Bay Company sent him from London . . . The pair of candelabra, approximately twenty-four inches high, with silver tray and snuffer at hand, appropriately placed on the table, flanking the sterling silver fruit dish, or castor as the occasion required, with a complete coffee or tea set at the end, supplemented by the pearl handled knives and forks with the accompanying spoons at each place, together with the dessert spoon and fork at the front of the plate, would be a setting to cheer the heart of any guest. Add to this picture . . . four decanters in silver holders on the sideboard.'

There is truth in these pictures. The mahogany tables, the graceful chairs, the crested silver, and many other items of furnishings owned by a number of chief factors and other Company officers are still in existence, scattered among descendants or in public museums, restored houses, and other repositories. Unfortunately, the documentation for assertions such as 'these were the dining room table and chairs, which were used originally in old Fort Victoria' or 'the square desk belonged to Dr McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver' is not always as firm as one could wish. It is possible that some of these items, even those now in the hands of, or acquired from, the factors' families, were originally purchased after the Hudson's Bay men had retired to comfortable homes in Victoria, Oregon City, or eastern Canada.



BOYCHUK STUDIO

*The dining-room suite said to have been used by Chief Factor John McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver.*

In any case, the silver candelabra, the heavy plate, and the pearl-handled knives and forks of tradition seem to have no reflection in the tin coffee pots, forebuck-handled tablespoons, and tin candlesticks listed in the inventories of Company-owned table furnishings. Such valuable possessions, when they appeared at all in the Big Houses, must have been the personal property of the officers themselves. And it may be imagined that their appearance in the mess hall was confined to special occasions, since it seems unlikely that they were placed in daily use for the edification of the clerks and junior officers.

What, then, is to be made of the reports of visitors like Anna Maria Pittman who was quite overwhelmed by the 'table set with blue' at which she dined at Fort Vancouver in 1837? First, even the common 'E ware' dishes listed in the inventories were impressive. They were often, as is proved by remnants uncovered by archaeologists, Spode or Copeland pieces of the types so much treasured by antique collectors today. Imported by the Company for the trade, they were of the best quality and handsome in their own right. Second, and perhaps even more important, there was the mental condition of the observers, most of whom had been long out of touch with the amenities of civilized life. Clerk George B. Roberts in later years shrewdly commented upon the enthusiasm with which visitors to Fort Vancouver described the Big House furnishings. 'The decanters & fine English glass set off the table' he wrote '& made it look I suppose superb to those who had come across the country.'