

The Columbia Boat

In January of 1811 David Thompson crossed over Athabaska Pass high in the Rocky Mountains above what is now Revelstoke, British Columbia. His small crew of fur traders was tired and hungry. Several turned back as soon as they reached the Columbia River. Only Thompson and two others, René Vallade and Jean Baptiste L'Amoureux, remained in 3 ½ feet of snow with limited tools and food. Two others, Pierre Pariel and Joseph Coté returned with some supplies. They built a 12-foot by 12-foot cabin, killed some moose to eat and looked for ways to build a canoe that would take them back to other traders once the snows had melted.

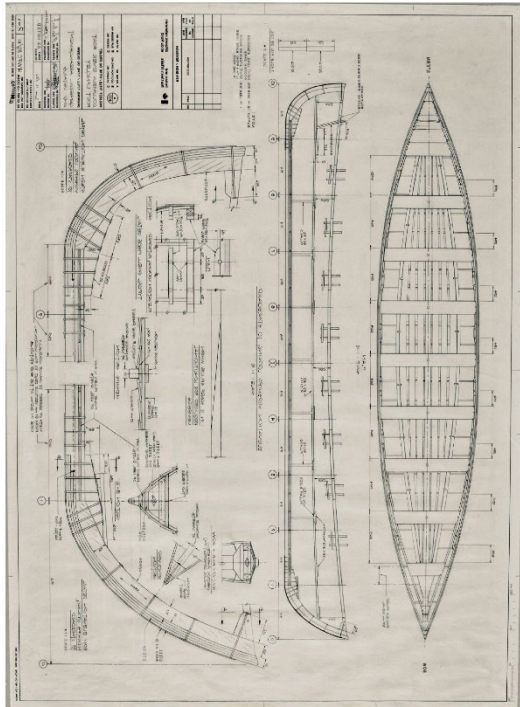


“Hauling a boat up a rapid, probably Columbia River,” Lt. Henry Warre, 1846. Courtesy Library and Archives Canada, No. 2834221.

Their favorite craft east of the Rockies was a birch bark canoe, light, easy to handle and portage with a well-developed design originated by eastern tribes. But here in the west, although there were large birch trees, the skins were thin, not “even thick enough to make a dish.” After some thoughts on boats he had used in the east, Thompson settled on the idea of building a boat using cedar planks split out from a 3 foot wide cedar that grew nearby using wedges they made themselves. They reshaped other tools and dug spruce roots from the frozen ground to make cordage to bind the boards together. Over the next 3 and a half months they constructed the first cedar plank canoe used by the fur trade on the Columbia River.

Thompson and his men were part of the North West Company, a fur trade company that preceded the Hudson’s Bay Company by over a decade in setting up forts east of the Rocky Mountains. Little did they

know then that boats of Thompson's design would become the main vehicle of transportation in the west for the next 40 years. Over the following twelve months, Thompson would build nine more of these craft, continually refining the design as needed and as other tools and materials became available.



What ties this story to Hudson's Bay and the establishment of Fort Colville in 1825 is the role that their fort near Kettle Falls played in building these boats for the whole Columbia District. Thompson's next boat was built at Saleesh House on the Clark Fork River. It took him down to Lake Pend Oreille and on the Pend Oreille River near present-day Cusick. From there he went overland to Spokane House where the Little Spokane River joins the main Spokane River. Spokane House would become a site where many Columbia Boats were later built.

From there he travelled with fur trader and translator, Jaco Finlay up to Kettle Falls, where the annual salmon harvest and meeting of the tribes was already in progress. Speaking in French to Finlay who translated in Salish to the Colville Tribe (Sx^wyelpetk^w) who managed the fishery, Thomson at first sought good birch bark for a canoe. Again, failing to find anything suitable, he resorted to building a third cedar plank canoe. This would have been

hard to translate to the natives because the Colville's used dugout canoes. Upstream the Lakes Tribe (Sinixt) used sturgeon nosed canoes. Eventually Thompson settled on some less-than-perfect "branchy" cedar from a grove in the Colville Valley. With that, he Finlay and others built a 30-foot canoe, 5 feet wide that held 7 men plus food, trade goods and a Sanpoil couple who acted as translators. They left Kettle Falls on July 3rd, met many tribes and arrived 12 days later in Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia with flags flying and singing French songs, much to the surprise of Astor's fur company. Their Columbia Boat had proven itself capable going down the river and would be used again taking supplies back up.

Because of its shape, it would be tempting to call it a canoe, which essentially it was. Because its French and Indian crew called it a *bateau*, as they did all boats, visiting travelers sometimes thought that was its specific name. But in HBC inventory records, "Columbia Boat" was the official designation of this type of craft. Hudson's Bay ordered over 100 of them made in the course of their business on the Columbia. To understand why this design was so successful and why their fort at Kettle Falls became the center of boat building during the life of the fort, we need to look at the details of its construction.

Native peoples were well-aware of the nature of cedar planks. Newly fallen trees could be split out into planks with wedges. David Thompson marveled at the boards used to build sheds for drying fish at the Kettle Falls fishery. Planks up to 20 feet long were made from logs drifted down the river. With vents for smoke and cross poles to hang the salmon on, both split boards and tule mats kept the interior dry.

Hudson's Bay, after the fort was established, had saw pits to cut the boards. One man pulled a crosscut saw down from below while another pulled the saw back up from above. It was hard, dirty work but did the job. The most critical piece was the bottom plank. At 17 inches or more wide in the middle and tapering to just a few at the bow and stern, it also had to be split fore and aft to allow the two ends to be

bent upward and tie into the gunwales. Ribs of oak were steamed and bent for the skeleton of the boat before planks were tied to the frame and each other. The planks overlapped each other leading a description of the boat as “clinker-built”. Even when green boards shrank, the overlap could be sealed. To seal the seams a mixture of pitch and tallow was melted into them. Materials for all these chores were carried on board. Traversing rapids, pulling the boat through rocky stretches, and hauling it out of the water were all hard on them.

But their light materials made it possible for 8 men to carry an empty boat over portages when necessary. There was also a provision in the center to hoist a sail when conditions permitted. (Wind surfing near Hood River started a long time ago.) Boats were loaded with 40 to 50 “pieces” each weighing about 90 pounds. So, the cargo alone could weigh 3600 to 4500 pounds.

Pierre Lacourse, a French Canadian born in Quebec, came up from Spokane House where he originally worked for the North West Company to become the chief boat builder for Hudson’s Bay at Fort Colville. He trained others in the craft. On a map drawn in 1850 to settle HBC claims with the United States, you can see a spot where the fort stood labeled “boat yard”.



"Hauling Up A Rapid (Les Dalles des Morts) On The Columbia River," Lt. Henry Warre, 1846. Image PDP00057 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives. Used by permission. See Appendix A for an alternative view by the same artist.

No history of Hudson’s Bay Fort Colville is complete without recognizing its key role in providing boats as well as food and furs for the whole of the Columbia region. In commemoration of that history, the Heritage Network hopes to contract for the creation of a replica of the Columbia Boat. It will take vision, skill and persistence to accomplish that for the bicentennial of the establishment of Fort Colville in 2025.

Extensive material for this article was derived from: Swift River by Laura Stovel, The Mapmaker’s Eye and Sources of the River by Jack Nisbet, *Columbia Boats and the River They Ran*, by Thomas H. Holloway published in the **Pacific Northwest Quarterly**, Spring 2022 and *Columbia Boats Construction Plans, with Historical and Technical Notes* by Thomas H. Holloway.