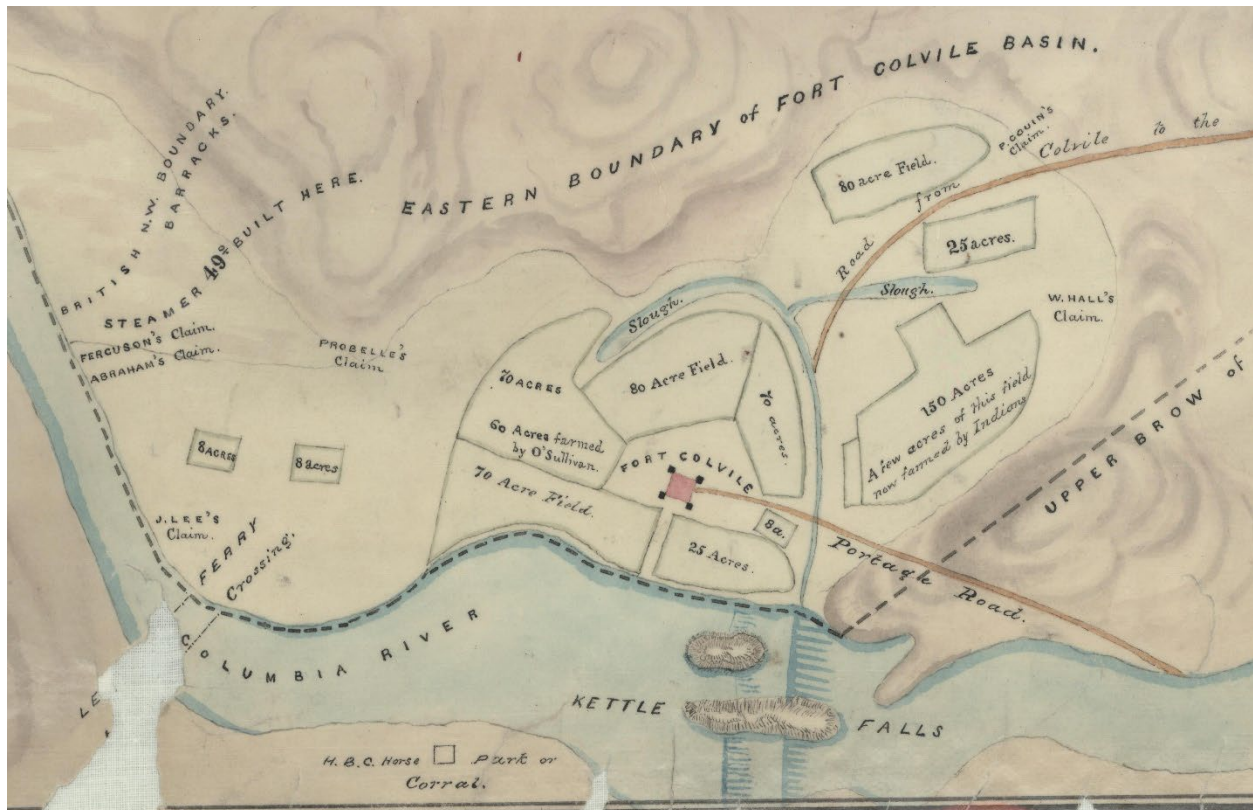


Fort, Factory, Farm and Fishery

Archibald McDonald became the Chief Trader at Hudson's Bay Fort Colville in 1835. Although officially called a fort, the main business of Hudson's Bay was trading furs. (For several years there was not even a palisade of posts protecting the trading post buildings.) Nevertheless, furs were valuable. A rifle cost a trapper 18 beaver pelts but the pelts earned far more than that back in England. In 1839 Fort Colville shipped 20,762 pelts from various species, the highest number recorded over the first 25 years of the fort's history. That number included almost 2000 beaver pelts, 626 mink, 263 lynx, 256 martin and over 300 bear skins including 46 grizzly bears. This looked good from the viewpoint of the Hudson's Bay Company and probably contributed to McDonald's promotion in 1842 to Chief Factor, a higher rank, and a better paid position. We might not think so today.

Judging the past from the privileged position of the future is an unfair temptation. Still, we have to make what we can of history because in this case, as in most, we are living with the same issues in the same places today. Besides bringing in furs, Fort Colville was an important farm, supplying food to fur trading posts and expeditions west of the Rockies.



In this map from the Angus McDonald land claim of 1865 the fort had 570 acres of land under cultivation. Major crops included wheat, potatoes, barley, oats, corn, peas, and garden produce. The 1838 production included 5 tons of fine and course flour plus thousands of bushels of grain and potatoes: 1400 pounds of ham and bacon and 4 kegs of pork. The company's cattle herd had increased from the initial bull and two heifers in 1825 to nearly two hundred by 1841. After the Canadian border was established in 1846 and shipments were rerouted from downstream to Vancouver, Washington to Vancouver Island in British Columbia, pack trains of 400 horses with 90-pound bundles on each side, left the fort for the Fraser River. Fort Colvile sold cheese, butter, and pork to the Russians at Sitka, Alaska, and sent flour, cornmeal, pork, and other products to HBC operations throughout the Pacific Northwest.

9000 lbs. fine flour
1000 lbs. gamine (course) flour
3500 bushels of wheat
800 bushels of Indian corn
150 bushels of peas
600 bushels of barley
500 bushels of oats
60 bushels of buckwheat
12 bushels of malt
600 bushels of potatoes
1400 lbs. of ham and bacon
4 kegs of pork

Furs and food were not the only products from Fort Colvile. It is no accident that Archibald



was promoted to “Chief Factor”. The fort was indeed a factory. It had a resident blacksmith and a chief boat builder. The boats were a unique product of the fort. They were the central transportation vehicle of the fur trade. A 30-foot Columbia Boat could hold over 2 tons of food and equipment plus 8 oarsmen and a few passengers. You could think of it as the semi-truck of the fur trade. Fort Colvile

produced over a hundred of them. The fort had a supply of cedar, the wood that made these craft light enough to be paddled upstream and carried overland with 16 men to avoid rapids. They were not easy to make. Slabs were cut in pit saws with one man underneath and one above. Pieces had to be fitted together to become water tight. Pitch and tallow was used to seal the joints. Extra parts, rope, paddles, a sail, and repair tools went with the boats. Columbia Boats are a tradition we can be proud of today.

As if these assets were not enough to justify the fort's existence and function, the fort itself was built next to one of the two largest salmon fisheries on the largest river west of the Rockies. In its prime, 1700 Chinook Salmon, ranging at or above 50 pounds each, were harvested daily. They were then distributed to the native tribes camped around the falls who would dry most of them. The fresh and dried salmon became part of the food supply for the fort. Native people supplied the salmon and furs but were not employees.

In 1839, Angus McDonald, visited Fort Colvile which was being managed by his great-uncle. Chief Trader, Archibald McDonald. Angus himself would later become Clerk at Fort Colvile from 1856 to 1871. Both men had native wives. Archibald's first wife, Chinook Princess Raven, gave birth to Ranald McDonald in 1824 but died shortly afterwards. (Ranald became famous for landing in Japan and teaching English there before foreigners were allowed.) Angus married Catherine Baptiste, daughter of an Iroquois/Scotch hunter, "Rascal" and a Nez Perce wife of noble blood. Angus's love for his wife and adoption of many native ways contrasted with Archibald's focus on profit and production at the fort.



The attitude of the Hudson's Bay administration toward its employees is evident in the way it lists them, first by name, then by ethnicity and then by occupation. A group of 24 full-time employees in 1830 was run by Chief Trader Francis Heron from Donegal, Ireland and two clerks, William Kittson an English Canadian and Nicholas Montour, Métis. Other "servants" (employees) were French Canadian, Orcadian Scot, Iroquois, and Métis. No local natives are listed. Archibald McDonald observed that the natives let thousands of salmon climb the falls and pass up the river before they started fishing for themselves. He concluded that the local native population was lazy. This lack of awareness or at least concern about the fur trade's effects on the environment and the indigenous population

was not as evident in his great-nephew Angus, who preferred to sleep with his family in a teepee during the summer. He stayed in the United States after the company moved operations into Canada, preferring family to financial security.

After the delineation of the Canadian/US border, trade and production at the fort declined. In 1858, Chief Trader George Blenkinsop reported that the soils of the plain around the post were exhausted. The local gold rush of 1854, occasioned by the discovery of gold near Waneta by Hudson's Bay employee, Joseph Morrell, increased conflicts between gold miners and the native population dramatically. As natives became angered settlers appealed to the US Government to establish Military Fort Colville, which they did in 1859. At the time, the majority of farmers in the Colville Valley were Native American. They took over where the Hudson's Bay fort left off by growing potatoes, grain and a variety of livestock.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 prompted the departure of southern soldiers and an influx of men released from prisons in California to take their place. That further increased tensions between descendants of the fur trade and US settlers. By 1871 the HBC fort was abandoned and sometimes referred to as "McDonald's pile of old logs." Native producers of grain were not allowed to use the flour mill after it became privately owned. Fish wheels decimated the salmon runs from 1879 to 1934.

The boom and bust economics and authoritarian legacy of the fur trade still haunts us today as we struggle for sustainability and equality. Regardless of that judgement, we need to acknowledge that everyone involved worked very hard together in the tough cultural transition initiated by Hudson's Bay Fort Colville.