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## More than a Fur Trading Post: Agricultural Development at Fort Victoria, 1846

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*Just three years after the establishment of Fort Victoria accounts made by Chief Factor Roderick Finlayson in the Fort Victoria Journal show that fur trading was infrequent at best. The first year of journal entries, which provides the closest look at what life at the fort consisted of in its formative years, shows that only 18 days included mention of a significant trade occurring; however, in that same year employees at the fort produced thousands of bushels of vegetables. The fort's role as an agricultural hub was discounted by the colony's first Governor, Richard Blanshard, who commented in 1851 that the fort was nothing more than a fur trading post - a comment that has had an undue influence on historical writing about Fort Victoria. After considering why the fort was designated as a main depot and examining how the Lekwungen People's land management practices incentivized the HBC to appropriate and reorganize land for company farming, this essay challenges Blanshard's comment, suggesting that Fort Victoria was much more than a fur trading post.*

To a great extent, the history of the first half of the nineteenth century in the Pacific Northwest has been defined by the Hudson's Bay Company's involvement in the region's fur trade. Until recently, the history of agriculture in the region has mostly been absent from the literature. Except for a few sources, most notably James R. Gibson's 1985 book *Farming the Frontier: The Agricultural Opening of the Oregon Country, 1786-1846*, it wasn't until an archived Hudson's Bay Company Journal from Fort Victoria was made public that agricultural development at Company forts was more critically examined. In 2009, Dr. John Lutz and a collection of students at the University of Victoria began transcribing the Journal and published it online.<sup>1</sup> Written by Hudson's Bay Company (hereafter referred to as HBC) employee Roderick Finlayson, the Journal details the daily activities of those living and working at the Fort from 1846 to 1850, revealing the prominence of the Company's agricultural efforts there. Despite the importance of agriculture at Fort Victoria, this topic has been the focus of few scholarly works and more should be done to unpack why farming became more significant at Fort Victoria than it did at other HBC forts.<sup>2</sup> The Fort Victoria Journal entries from

<sup>1</sup> "About," Fort Victoria Journal, Accessed November 20, 2020, <http://fortvictoriajournal.ca/about.php>.

<sup>2</sup> In this work the terms agricultural development and farming are used interchangeably.

1846 show that agriculture was well established only a few years after the construction of the fort and that farming was a product of the fort being a HBC general depot.

In Robin Fisher's 1992 book *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890*, a chapter is dedicated to what Fisher calls the 'transitional years'—the first decade of the colony of Vancouver Island, which was established in 1849. Governor Richard Blanshard, appointed by the Colonial Office, became increasingly frustrated with HBC practices and, after a year and a half, left the colony complaining that it was "nothing more than a fur trading post."<sup>3</sup> Fisher agrees with this assessment, noting in his book that he believes Blanshard's observations were correct.<sup>4</sup>

This is problematic, as Fort Victoria was much more than a trading post - from its conception through to the period that Blanshard was Governor, the Fort was, among other things, an important centre of agricultural production for the HBC. Finlayson's Journal shows that agricultural labour was often the most common labour activity at the fort. In his 1891 biography, Finlayson acknowledges this, stating that by the late 1840's farming had assumed a large proportion of their operations and had become "the centre of the company's trade west of the Rocky Mountains."<sup>5</sup> As helpful as these sources are in confirming that daily operations were largely agricultural, they lack any sort of explanation as to why farming became more significant at Fort Victoria than it did at other HBC forts. Answering this question relies on contextualizing the Journal with sources that provide insight about relevant conditions, such as the HBC's long-term plans in the Northwest and the state of Aboriginal land use in the region.

The HBC was having trouble finding a quality harbour with adjacent arable land that could accommodate large-scale farming in the Puget Sound—it was a requirement that the Company's depot must have access to "an extensive tract of...land suitable for tillage."<sup>6</sup> This all changed when the Company expanded its search north and arrived in Port Camosun (the harbour that would become the location of Fort Victoria). In 1843 HBC employee James Douglas described the region as a "perfect Eden" suitable for settlement.<sup>7</sup> Southern Vancouver Island appeared to be a suitable location for a new Company depot that could provide great agricultural advantages.<sup>8</sup> Despite Douglas' description, it's important to recognize that this 'Eden' was not natural—it was an anthropogenic landscape. Lekwungen people had lived around Port Camosun for thousands of years

3 Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), 50.

4 Ibid.

5 Roderick Finlayson, *Biography of Roderick Finlayson*, (Victoria: publisher not identified, 1891), 19.

6 William K. Lamb, "The Founding of Fort Victoria," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, no. 2 (April, 1943): 73, <http://www.library.ubc.ca/archives/pdfs/bchf/bchq19432.pdf>

7 G. P. de T. Glazebrook, eds., *The Hargrave Correspondence, 1821-1843*, (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1938), 420.

8 James R. Gibson, *Farming the Frontier: The Agricultural Opening of the Oregon Country, 1786-1846*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1985), 61.

before the HBC's arrival and had well-developed Aboriginal agricultural practices.<sup>9</sup>

Literature on the development of Fort Victoria and the Colony of Vancouver Island published in the twentieth century often relied solely on settler accounts and colonial institutions to inform their work, leaving racial biases unchecked. While it may not have been the author's intentions, this practice allowed for the perpetuation of what modern historians are increasingly confronting and labeling as colonial origin narratives. As Fisher rightly notes, these narratives worked to disestablish Indigenous control of territory and often portrayed Indigenous actors as hostile savages.<sup>10</sup> More recently, historians focusing on Indigenous-Settler relations have written about the Vancouver Island Treaties and territory dispossession in ways that work to re-assert Indigenous agency in the historiography of the Pacific Northwest. This paper draws from two books, one by Lamb and the other by Gibson, which lack acknowledgement of how the HBC functioned as an oppressive colonial institution, appropriated Indigenous territory, and contributed to the degradation of Indigenous culture. Addressing the HBC's contribution to Indigenous oppression in the literature on the history of the Pacific Northwest is wholly necessary.

Looking at the first year of Finlayson's Fort Victoria Journal, it's clear that Vancouver Island would not have been profitable solely as a fur trading post. Considering the Journals first month, May of 1846, one can see that fur trading was infrequent at best. The first mention of trade isn't until the fourth entry, in which Finlayson writes that "little or nothing done in the way of trade with the Natives" was occurring.<sup>11</sup> A day later, on May 13, 1846, Finlayson notes that most people at the Fort were employed planting potatoes.<sup>12</sup> Out of the 245 journal entries from 1846, there are only 18 days that mention significant trades occurring. Out of the remaining 227 days, 29 saw some sort of smaller trade, whether it was trading for salmon with the local Lekwungen people or small cash transactions with Fort employees.<sup>13</sup> At one point, there was a period of 20 consecutive days without a single trade mentioned in the Journal.<sup>14</sup> Finlayson often wrote phrases such as "no trade worth mentioning."<sup>15</sup> In mid-July, during peak trade season, Finlayson remarked that the fur trade

9 John Lutz, "Preparing Eden: Indigenous Land Use and European Settlement on Southern Vancouver Island," In *Plants, People, and Places: The Roles of Ethnobotany and Ethnoecology in Indigenous Peoples' Land Rights in Canada and Beyond* ed. by Nancy Turner (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 116.

10 Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 94.

11 "Fort Victoria Journal," May 12, 1846, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, B.226/ a/1, edited and transcribed by Graham Brazier et al, eds. *Fort Victoria Journal*, [www.fortvictoriajournal.ca](http://www.fortvictoriajournal.ca) (Accessed 20 November 2020).

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 "Fort Victoria Journal," Hudson's Bay Company Archives, B.226/ a/1.

15 Ibid.

was “quite dull at present.”<sup>16</sup> On the last day of November Finlayson notes that the weather had affected trade prospects and “nothing was coming in.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it was quite common for there to be an extended period without any note of significant trading; however, almost every Journal entry had detailed notes about farming operations.

By 1846, the scale of farming at Fort Victoria was significant—there were several hundred acres under cultivation by the time of the first Journal entries.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the first year of the Journal, one can find evidence of the production of turnips, potatoes, oats, barley, wheat, cabbage, carrots, and peas, along with the planting of fruit trees—specifically apples, pears, and peaches.<sup>19</sup> There was also a sizeable population of cattle on the plains near the fort, which produced meat for HBC employees around the Northwest.<sup>20</sup> While Finlayson provides insight on the state of trading and farming in the Journal, this source doesn’t explain why the Fort’s location on the southern tip of Vancouver Island was chosen by HBC officials in the first place – for this, W. Kaye Lamb’s 1943 article on the founding of Fort Victoria provides much insight.

Throughout the 1830’s, HBC officials had been debating what the best location for a Pacific general depot would be.<sup>21</sup> While George Simpson, the company’s Governor, believed the main depot should be further north than the Columbia River, Fort Vancouver’s Chief Factor John McLoughlin was adamant that his fort functioned well as the depot and that no changes should be made.<sup>22</sup> The debate centered around two main considerations, the first being the logistical problems with Fort Vancouver. As the Fort was considerably inland along the Columbia River, all arriving ships had to pass through the treacherous mouth of the river, which had multiple large sand bars that were known to wreck ships. Seeing as the HBC relied heavily on the success of shipments between their depots and London, a sunken ship posed a significant threat to the company’s profitability in the Northwest.<sup>23</sup> The second issue that influenced the debate was the state of the Anglo-American border dispute. Uncertainty regarding where the borderline would be drawn made Simpson increasingly interested in shifting the depot further north. As Lamb notes, Simpson recognized that it was “most desirable that the main depot should be located in territory which would ultimately become British.”<sup>24</sup> By 1835, Simpson instructed McLoughlin to send a group north to the Puget Sound to look for a suitable location; however, none of the bays investigated offered good agricultural land, which was one of the essential requirements for a

depot.<sup>25</sup> The search was extended to the southern end of Vancouver Island, and in the summer of 1837 an expeditionary group captained by W.H. McNeill arrived at Port Camosun. The crew was impressed with the harbour and mentioned it to their superiors; however, it would be another six years until the HBC would decide to build a fort at this “unequaled” location.<sup>26</sup> In this time it became clear that the boundary question would cement Simpson’s decision to move forward with Fort Victoria. By the early 1840’s a large influx of migrants had entered the Willamette Valley south of Fort Vancouver and escalated pressure on the HBC to move its main depot - it was becoming increasingly clear that the United States would push to claim land further north than the Columbia River.<sup>27</sup> In fact, in 1842 Simpson expressed that he believed the Strait of Juan de Fuca would constitute the border once things were settled because the Americans would want a “Northern Harbour and... the British would be pressured to give them all of Puget Sound.”<sup>28</sup> To the same end, HBC control of the southern end of Vancouver Island would help reinforce British claim of everything north of the Strait, protecting the entire island (which became the colony of Vancouver Island in 1849) and the region of New Caledonia (which became the colony of British Columbia in 1858).<sup>29</sup> Long-held logistical concerns about Fort Vancouver combined with political concerns about the Anglo-American borderline influenced the decision to move the depot to Port Camosun.

In his letter to Governor Simpson about the 1837 survey of southern Vancouver Island, James Douglas wrote that the country surrounding Port Camosun was beautiful, presenting a succession of plains and groves covered with luxuriant vegetation.<sup>30</sup> Today, Victoria has remained characterized by its picturesque environment. Reflecting Douglas’s description, the city is affectionately known by many as the City of Gardens and continues to be revered for its luxuriant vegetation. Victoria is located in a MM-CDF Climatic zone (Moist, Maritime Coastal Douglas Fir), an extraordinarily small area around the southern tip of the Island that experiences more sun and is much drier and warmer than its surrounding regions. This climate also provides the conditions for unique flora such as Arbutus and Garry Oak trees.<sup>31</sup> Acknowledgement of these unique trees can be found in the accounts of HBC company employees and visitors in these first few years at Fort Victoria. Douglas noted the prevalence of oak and pine trees in his

<sup>25</sup> Lamb, “The Founding of Fort Victoria,” 73.

<sup>26</sup> Gibson, *Farming the Frontier*, 61.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>28</sup> Lamb, “The Founding of Fort Victoria,” 82.

<sup>29</sup> Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> E. E. Rich, eds., *The Letters of John McLoughlin from Fort Vancouver to the Governor and Committee. First series, 1825-38 (volume 1)*, (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 2013), 287.

<https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.3138/9781442618381>.

<sup>31</sup> “Coastal Douglas Fir Zone,” Faculty of Forestry Centre for Forest Conservation Genetics UBC, Accessed November 18, 2020, <https://cfcg.forestry.ubc.ca/resources/cataloguing-in-situ-genetic-resources/cdf-zone/>.

<sup>16</sup> “Fort Victorian Journal,” Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, B226/ a/1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Gibson, *Farming the Frontier*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> “Fort Victoria Journal,” Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, B.226/ a/1.

<sup>20</sup> Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 62.

<sup>21</sup> Lamb, “The Founding of Fort Victoria,” 71.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

1837 correspondence to Simpson.<sup>32</sup> Simpson himself called the region a “perfect asylum in point of climate and scenery.”<sup>33</sup> Berthold Seemann, a naturalist who visited the Fort in 1846, noted that the landscape around the fort looked like “a natural park; noble oaks...are seen in the greatest luxuriance.”<sup>34</sup> There exists a degree of providentialism in these observations: HBC employees seem to have been content believing it was God’s grace that led them to come across such prime agricultural land. Lutz discusses this in “Preparing Eden” asserting that while the Europeans thought they were looking at ‘natural parks’, they were looking at land that had been “indebted to manual labour for [its] creation”.<sup>35</sup> Lutz explains that the landscape around Port Camosun—in fact the majority of the southern tip of the island—was not natural at all. The countryside in this region was a highly anthropogenic landscape that had been occupied by the Lekwungen people for time immemorial and was controlled by a group of extended families.<sup>36</sup>

Recall that one of the requirements for a new HBC depot location was that it had to have an extensive tract of land suitable for tillage.<sup>37</sup> It’s no surprise that Port Camosun was chosen, as Aboriginal agriculture had already existed there for generations.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, Lutz uses the example of camas cultivation in the plains as an example of how physical manipulation of the land by Lekwungen people made the area more appealing for colonial development.<sup>39</sup> It’s likely that HBC employees such as Douglas ignored signs of aboriginal agricultural development that would have been visible when they arrived, as they knew that the HBC would soon make efforts to appropriate the fields.

The racial biases towards Indigenous Peoples in accounts by Douglas and Seemann cannot be ignored. In Douglas’s 1843 correspondence to John Hargrave, he mentions that the Lekwungen people had “as [of] yet lost no trait of their natural barbarity.”<sup>40</sup> Reference to this supposed incivility is more direct in Seemann’s *Narrative*, in which he claims that development around Fort Victoria had “encroached upon the beautiful domain”, so that the “savage could no longer exist in all his grossness.”<sup>41</sup> The grand irony here is that the very beauty Seemann references was the product of Indigenous industriousness. A key example of how Europeans at Fort Victoria misunder-

32 Glazebrook, eds., *The Hargrave Correspondence*, 420.

33 Lamb, “The Founding of Fort Victoria,” 117.

34 Berthold Seemann, *Narrative of the Voyage of H.M.S. Herald During the Years 1845-1851: Under the Command of Captain Henry Kellett Being a Circumnavigation of the Globe, and Three Cruises to the Arctic Regions in Search of Sir John Franklin, Volume 1*, (Waterloo: Reeves and Company, 1853), 102.

35 John Lutz, “Preparing Eden,” 112.

36 Ibid., 114.

37 Lamb, “The Founding of Fort Victoria,” 73.

38 John Lutz, “Preparing Eden,” 116.

39 Ibid.

40 Glazebrook, eds., *The Hargrave Correspondence*, 421.

41 Seemann, *Narrative of the Voyage of H.M.S. Herald*, 102.

stood Indigenous relations to their environment is the act of “burning the woods.”<sup>42</sup> Under the entry for August 11, 1846 in the Fort Victoria Journal, Finlayson records that “the Indians [sic] are now beginning to set the plains on fire,” and that the Company’s hay stockpile was nearly burnt by it.<sup>43</sup> Two more entries on August 12th and August 20th refer to the prolonged burning, which Finlayson notes “[ran] in all directions.”<sup>44</sup> Though it’s not explicitly stated, Finlayson insinuates the Lekwungen people were acting recklessly and indicates that the burning was not welcomed by those at the Fort. Lutz notes in “Preparing Eden” that burning such as the one described by Finlayson created the plains that subsequently enticed the HBC to settle in the area. To maintain the plains, fires were set annually to clear out the undergrowth.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the annual burning performed by the Lekwungen people was a form of fertilization, and as a complementary effect created more browsing room for deer and elk.<sup>46</sup>

In review, the prime agricultural land created and maintained for generations by the Lekwungen people was one of the main reasons the HBC chose to build Fort Victoria at Port Camosun. As the Fort grew larger and the farm expanded outward a new problem arose for Finlayson; the Company was competing for land use with the locals. Lutz references this when discussing the appropriation of camas fields, most notably ‘Me-eqan’, one of the Pacific Northwest’s prime camas fields.<sup>47</sup> This competition for land is exemplified by Finlayson’s Journal entry on July 28, 1846, which states some Lekwungen people were “beginning to steal [the HBC’s] potatoes and sell them to the ships.”<sup>48</sup> Of course, the HBC had appropriated the land they were growing their potatoes on.

In 1846 there were significant farming operations in progress at Fort Victoria and several hundred acres were under cultivation.<sup>49</sup> There were multiple factors that made Fort Victoria such a significant and successful agricultural centre. Had the HBC not been looking to relocate their main depot in the early nineteenth century, one could argue that Fort Victoria might never have been established; however, increasing pressure from the United States to place the international border north of the Columbia River combined with concern about the safety of ships travelling to Fort Vancouver led George Simpson to look to Vancouver Island for a viable replacement location. Since it was a requirement that the new depot had to have extensive agricultural land, Fort Victoria was destined to develop extensive agricultural operations. In only a few years, farming at Fort Victoria had grown to a point where it was able to provide supplies for other HBC forts in the Pacific Northwest.<sup>50</sup> By the end of 1846, the Fort had produced

42 “Fort Victoria Journal,” August 11, 1846, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, B.226/ a/1.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Lutz, “Preparing Eden,” 119.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 120.

48 “Fort Victoria Journal,” July 28, 1846, Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, B.226/ a/1.

49 Gibson, *Farming the Frontier*, 64.

50 Ibid.

2100 bushels of potatoes, 800 of wheat, 400 of oat, 300 of peas, and had butchered 63 cows.<sup>51</sup> Far from being “nothing more than a fur trading post,” in a short period of time Fort Victoria had become a significant agricultural producer in the region.

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<sup>51</sup> Gibson, *Farming the Frontier*, 64.