

The Governor's Gate

The last remnant of what was once the heart of the fur trade has quite handily survived the ravages of time, but was nearly destroyed – not once but several times – by the plunderings of progress. The gate's history is one of rejection and threatened destruction and its existence today, as the centrepiece of Fort Garry Gateway Park on the east side of Fort Street, seems due more to luck and happenstance than civic planning.

The last remnant of Upper Fort Garry, which was dismantled in 1881–82, the gate is a shell structure. The only decoration on its bare stone walls are commemorative plaques placed by the Canadian Club of Winnipeg and the Historic Sites Advisory Board of Canada. There is also a plaque to Ambroise-Didyme Lépine, Louis Riel's adjutant

W. McKim / National Archives of Canada / PA-28577

A pair of coureurs du bois stop for a pipe with their dogs at the old Fort Garry Gate in 1904.



The Governor's Gate

general. The gate stood at the rear entry to the fort, in the north wall; the front entry faced the Assiniboine River. It was built when Upper Fort Garry was expanded in 1853 by Alexander Hunter Murray, a journalist, artist and journeyman builder who joined the Hudson's Bay Company in 1846 to build Fort Yukon. He designed

the stone gate at Upper Fort Garry when the property was expanded to make room for a home for the HBC governor.

The stonework was done by laborers recruited from the Chelsea Pensioners regiment, who had come from England to attempt to defend the HBC's monopolist trade policies. [TO PAGE 18](#)

Government House, the home of governors of Rupert's Land and later of Manitoba's lieutenant governors, rises behind the Governor's Gate in this 1879 winter scene by Lionel MacDonald Stephenson.

Lionel MacDonald Stephenson / National Archives of Canada C-2042314



Upper Fort Garry

The Governor's Gate is but a small reminder of the formidable fort that once dominated the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. With four large bastions and five-metre-high walls, it was a visual demonstration of the Hudson's Bay Company's commanding role in the fur trade. Built in 1835 and named Upper Fort Garry to distinguish it from Lower Fort Garry built four years earlier, it was the second so-named fort built near the strategic

junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, and the last of four forts that rose and fell within a century of the coming of Europeans to the region. The first was Fort Rouge, established in 1738 for Pierre Gaultier de la Vérendrye, was one of a network of trading posts from Lake Superior to Lake Winnipeg. The timbers of this fort are said to lie beneath the junction of Winnipeg's two major thoroughfares, Portage Avenue and Main Street, but no visual evidence of

the structure lingers. La Vérendrye's forts were built with haste and Fort Rouge was likely a crude wooden structure, a European oddity on the boundless prairie, and destined to deteriorate. The name lingers today only in the name of Winnipeg's first suburb – Fort Rouge – that stretches southwest of the forks of the Red and Assiniboine.

It was not until the turn of the nineteenth century, when rivalry between the HBC and the North West Company intensi-



Henry James Warre / Hudson's Bay Company Archives / PA-49

Henry James Warre's rather whimsical 1845 depiction of Upper Fort Garry recalls a medieval European castle.

The Governor's Gate

National Library of Canada / C-016834 Inset: National Archives of Canada / PA-28579

fied in Red River, that fort building at The Forks began in earnest. In 1806, the Nor'Westers built Fort Gibraltar within fifty metres of the Red River's west bank in opposition to the HBC, and, within a few years, to buttress the attack on the Scottish settlers brought in by the HBC's majority share holder, Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk. Its stockade made of oak trees split in two, its picketing as high as five metres, Fort Gibraltar shielded eight houses within its walls and lasted until March 1816 when HBC officers and men seized and destroyed it.

To stake its claim in Red River, the HBC had built Fort Douglas nearby in 1813, and with the destruction of Fort Gibraltar the company seized control of the Red and denied passage and provisions to the Nor'Westers. In June 1816, some Nor'Westers and their allies captured Fort Douglas after killing the local HBC governor and twenty of his men at Seven Oaks, a few kilometres north of the fort.

Lord Selkirk restored order with the help of disbanded Swiss mercenary soldiers and the Nor'Westers rebuilt Fort Gibraltar. But in 1821, after an epic struggle, the two fur trading companies merged and Fort Gibraltar, better situated at The Forks, was



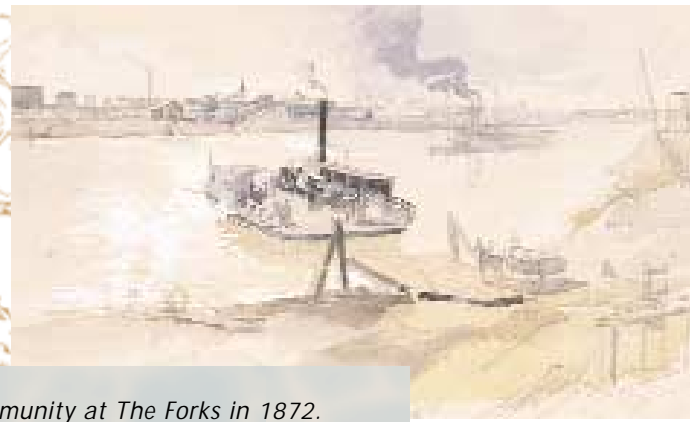
taken over by the HBC and renamed Fort Garry. Fort Douglas was sold to a Red River settler in 1825 and vanished the following year in one of the most severe floods in the Red River Valley's recorded history.

The 1826 flood so damaged Fort Garry that the HBC constructed a new post, Lower Fort Garry, thirty-two kilometres north along the river, as its administrative centre. But by 1836, with the Red River colony clearly settled and growing at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine, the HBC returned to The Forks and built a new fort, Upper Fort Garry, an impressive structure with barracks, officers quarters, chief factor's residence, general store, fur store, pemmican store and governor's residence.

By 1870, the fort was a more business-like place that served a growing multicultural community, including traditional customers like Mild Elk Spirit (inset) and the first of what would soon be a flood of immigrant settlers.

In the early 1850s, with trade increasing, the fort was extended to the north with the Governor's Gate as a private entrance to the governor's house and gardens. The fort remained the seat of government for the District of Assiniboia and the Red River settlement until 1870 when the Province of Manitoba was created.

Map: The Winnipeg Free Press
Painting: Frederick B. Schell / National Archives of Canada / C-120519



This map shows the community at The Forks in 1872. Broadway, as yet unnamed, heads west behind Fort Garry, "Main Road" leads to the Assiniboine River, while a trail leads to the Red River and the ferry to St. Boniface. The ferry was still transporting passengers in 1881, when this painting was created.

Constructed of a combination of cut limestone blocks and limestone rubble, it has a large central arch, gun portals, a bastion for a guard house and a crenellated top. It's believed to contain remnants of the North West Company's Fort Gibraltar, which was rebuilt in 1821 when that fur trading company amalgamated with the Hudson's Bay Company.

Fort Gibraltar was soon renamed Fort Garry after Deputy-Governor Nicholas Garry, who had overseen the union of the two companies.

By the spring of 1882, only four small buildings, the Governor's House and the gate remained on the fort site. The buildings were sold for \$292 and the house for \$100 and a future as firewood. The gate's prospects were uncertain at best. Over the next seventy years, it was rejected as a gift to the city; almost torn down and rebuilt on another site, not just once, but twice, and nearly razed and replaced by a club-

house. On two occasions, in 1912 and again in 1962, it almost became the main attraction in a civic park in downtown Winnipeg. The latter plan was also to contain the 1897 Queen Victoria Jubilee fountain, which had stood at the site of the old City Hall on Main Street. With the old building about to be replaced, a new home was being sought for the fountain.

In the intervening decades, Canadian, British and American souvenir hunters carted off thousands of stone chips in a preview of the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of the twentieth century. And visitors by the tens

of thousands had their photographs taken beside the old gate. Among them were Buffalo Bill Cody and his enor-

mously popular troupe of performers, on a tour of Winnipeg in 1910.

Somehow, through luck or circumstance, the structure survived all these assaults.

In 1886, the gate was offered, free of charge, to the Winnipeg government by Charles J. Brydges, the HBC land commissioner, on condition that it be dismantled and re-erected elsewhere. With admirable foresight, City Council preferred to preserve the gate where it stood and attempted to buy ten lots around it. But the deal fell through when council members felt the \$8,000 asking price for the lots was too much.

Renewed and refurbished, the Governor's Gate is a hidden treasure that continues to draw thousands of visitors in search of the past.



Dennis East

The Manitoba Historical Society stepped in next, asking both the Hudson's Bay Company and HBC Governor Donald Smith for a donation of the site or its sale at a nominal figure.

As the gate grew more and more dilapidated and proposals were made to build an athletic field on the property in 1893, the Historical Society scaled down its request to include just the two lot sites on which the gate was located. The HBC responded with a quote of \$2,400 for the lots, but public contributions to save the gate were not forthcoming.

Once again, a suggestion was made to move the structure across Main Street



and rebuild it as the entrance to a new athletic park. But when the dust settled, again the gate stayed in the place in which it had been built in the 1850s.

Four years later, in 1897, the Winnipeg Athletic Organization proposed a clubhouse and gymnasium to be built on the east side of Fort Street south of Broadway, close to the gate site. Then unexpectedly in 1900, the HBC gave the "tottering" structure and four of the reserve lots to the City of Winnipeg "as a public park forever". According to subsequent media reports, quick work on its tumbledown condition soon restored the gate to its former "noble and warlike aspect".

Still, controversy continued, this time over the choice of a name. There were protests against calling it the Strathcona Gate, which echoed one



of Donald Smith's titles. The public wanted no ties to the monopolistic HBC powers. Eventually, the name Fort Garry Park won the day.

Though maintained for the next fifty years by the Public Parks Board, by the 1940s, the gate was in poor condition. It had survived the predations of lacrosse, hockey and toboggan teams playing on empty land nearby and had almost fallen into the ignominy of becoming part of a miniature replica of the old fort in an extended park

Then, to the surprise of city workers in 1943, it was discovered that both the outer and inner gates had disappeared. Both have since been replaced.

By 1960, the park had become overgrown and was all but invisible from the street, surrounded as it was by a gas station, the Manitoba Club



and the Grain Exchange Curling Club. A plan for a larger park, to include the statue and fountain of Queen Victoria mentioned above, was never completed

but the vines were removed from the gates, seven trees were cut down and new flower beds were planted.

Twenty years later, under the federal Agreements for Recreation and Conservation (ARC) Program, the gateway was restored as part of a multi-million dollar revitalization of The Forks, the historic confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers.

The \$160,000 facelift included removing fill from around the gate, erecting fifty-nine metres of replica wood fencing to simulate the 1850s wooden wall and placing a mural inside the gate, providing an approximate view through the gate of the scene in 1881. During



this restoration work, it was discovered that a nineteenth-century bronze cannon had gone missing. It has never been recovered.

Today the large mural – actually an enlarged nineteenth-century photo of the governor's house and garden just before the fort was torn down – is still visible as one enters the gate. This same photograph can be seen on page 43, in the chapter on Government House.

Unfortunately, the mural has been vandalized and graffiti, most of it people's names in chalk, can be seen on the wooden walls.

Still, a walk though the park and the gate's guard house leaves a haunting sense of having stepped back through time, to an era when voyageurs travelled the rivers, and Upper Fort Garry was the center of the fur trade world.



Left to right: National Archives of Canada / PA-28581; F.V. Bingham / National Archives of Canada / PA-127359; Albertype Co. / National Archives of Canada / PA-31537; Provincial Archives of Manitoba / N10773; John Boyd Collection / National Archives of Canada / PA-87214; Albertype Co. Collection / National Archives of Canada / PA-31589.

This series of photographs, from far left, shows how remarkably little the old gate has changed since 1876, when Lt. Gov. Morris posed with his eldest daughter. In 1880, Lt. Gov. Joseph Edouard Cauchon was the last occupant of the house. The gate stood alone in 1895, when a traveller in his cariole stopped with his dogs; fifteen years later, when Buffalo Bill (in right front, wearing a black hat) and his troupe stopped for a photo op, ivy had covered the walls. The trees were reaching a fair size when the next photograph was taken in 1925 and, by 1960, all but hid the gate from view. Both vines



and trees were removed in a '60s overhaul, as can be seen in the final photograph.