The Red River and Lake Winnipeg

These write-ups and resource links are intended to serve as the meat on the bones of the lecture outlines and PowerPoints of the Local History Teaching Aids (LHTA) materials. The goal in composing them has been for clarity, which is a key part of making the material interesting and inspiring. The material below is presented as a resource for the teacher, rather than for the students.

I. The Influence of the Red River and Lake Winnipeg on Regional History

*Manitoba is a province known for its abundant lakes and rivers. Today, our waterways are sources of drinking water, obstacles for driving, or sites for boating and relaxing. Yesterday, however, Manitoba's lakes and rivers were its most efficient highways. Water was the stage upon which the drama of Red River North's history was unfolded. Whether motivated by faith or enterprise, hard working men built the region on the waters of the Red River and Lake Winnipeg.*

**A) The Stage of History: Geographic Bearings**

Before delving into the history of riverland, it helps to review the geography of the lake and river. Relatively few people venture north of Hecla Island, and yet regional history is tied to the whole of Lake Winnipeg. Maps are included with the PowerPoint slides corresponding to this text. The following markers are of particular importance:

1. **Rivers:** Hayes, Red, Assiniboine, Winnipeg
2. **Posts/Towns/etc.:** York Factory, Norway House, Grand Rapids, Warren's Landing, Grindstone Point, Berens River, Gimli, Selkirk, Colvile Landing, Lower Fort Garry, Lockport
3. **Regions:** North basin of Lake Winnipeg, south basin of Lake Winnipeg, Red River North
4. **Crucial Node:** The Forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. This was the crossroads of travel between north, south, east, and west. The position of Selkirk, St. Andrews, and St. Clements along its northern outlet was of considerable importance to their history.

**The Forks of crucial importance**

The waterway story opened with the canoe kingdom. Indians piloted their **canoes** north to **York Factory** to trade with the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) after the post's establishment in **1684**. The company relied on Indian supply lines until the Northwest Company (NWC) began drawing the canoes south. The NWC was founded in **1779** by mainly Scottish merchants. It was based out of **Montreal** following the British conquest during the Seven Years' War. The NWC built on the exploration of southern Manitoba by Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Vérendrye and his sons in the 1730s. La Vérendrye's son followed the Winnipeg River to Lake Winnipeg, founding Fort Maurepas near Fort Alexander. The NWC established fur trade posts at the Forks and elsewhere in the south. The HBC responded by hiring Indian craftsmen to build canoes for the company to reach inland. Voyaging by canoe wound down considerably after the **1821** merger of the HBC and the NWC, but the vessels continued to be used on a lesser scale for rapid travel and delivery. The significance of the canoe was its role in enabling early trade and exploration in southern Manitoba, as well as its use in the establishment of many fur trade posts.

**Canoe trade and exploration**

**B) The  
 Fur Trade**

The real impact on Red River North's development in the pre-industrial era was had by men steering **York boats**, so called for their base of operations at York Factory. York boats were built to carry large cargos in shallow waters with few crew. They were easy to repair, sturdy, and manoeuvrable. They were originally built by craftsmen from the **Orkney Islands** (north of Scotland) who inherited their designwork from their **Viking** ancestors. They typically operated in "**brigades**" of seven or eight. Joseph Isbister, chief factor of Albany Fort in 1743, influenced the HBC to start building boats for inland runs.

**Impact of York boats**

The "**York Main Line**" was a 435 mile journey through lakes, rivers, rapids, falls, and 34 portages. It began at York Factory on Hudson Bay and ran down the Hayes River to Norway House. Once operations began to centre around the Forks, brigades outfitted themselves for the round trip from Winnipeg to York Factory. They left in June and returned in October.

The historical significance of the York boats was multifaceted. They had a role to play in geopolitics, settlement, mission work, and military expeditions.

1. York boats extended HBC trade and governance inland, paving the way for Lord Selkirk's Colony to be established through company grant.
2. The Selkirk settlers reached Red River via York boats from York Factory. The settlers laid the basis of society for the future province of Manitoba.
3. York boats provided transportation for missionaries throughout the northwest.
4. York boats played an important role in the defence of British territory. For example, 30 boats carried 347 soldiers of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment from Hudson Bay to Red River in response to US President James K. Polk's (1845-49) aggressive expansionist policy. In 1869, they transported troops from Toronto to put down the Riel Rebellion. York boats were also used during the Nile River Expedition of 1884-85.

In sum, the York boats served to bring people deeper into western Canada. They helped transfer the centre of HBC operations to Red River and establish the colony that grew up around them.

Company men, settlers, and missionaries used the York boats to establish their activities in Manitoba. The HBC originally did not allow missionaries into the Northwest, but changed its policy after its merger with the NWC in 1821. It hoped allowing a few missionaries in would settle the people of the northwest and make the roudy environment better for business. Originally, the company only permitted a small number of Anglican missionaries, but in 1840 allowed three Wesleyan Methodists in to limit Anglican and Roman Catholic influence. **James Evans**, a Methodist, did important work among the Cree through the **Rossville mission** at **Norway House**. He invented an alphabet for writing the **Cree language** and taught school to the children.

**Missionaries**

**C)   
Red River**

Anglicans originally had the most significant impact on the Red River Valley. **Rev. William Cockran** of the **Church Missionary Society** (CMS) did the most to shape Red River North. He set up a farm and school at St. Andrews' **Lower Church** in 1829 and built the stone church there in 1845-49. He also convinced Chief Peguis' band of Saulteaux/Ojibway Indians to form an agricultural settlement at **St. Peters** in 1833. Alongside his mission work, Cockran was an active promoter of civilization in the colony. His work fostered not only churches, but also schools and agriculture in Red River. The St. Peters settlement grew into a prosperous community that weathered the transition following the demise of the buffalo better than most Indian bands in Manitoba.

**Rev. Cockran's work**

Lord Selkirk's settlers also used HBC York boats and water routes. They arrived on the shores of Hudson Bay in 1811, wintered there, and went south on the York boats to Red River in **1812**. They settled in river lots along the Red and did not venture far onto the plains. The most efficient transportation of the day was by boat rather than road. Lord Selkirk himself arrived by York boat with his De Meuron Regiment of Swiss hired soldiers in 1817. That same year, he signed the Selkirk Treaty with Chief Peguis and other chiefs, giving his settlers exclusive rights to a two mile deep stretch of territory along the Red and Assiniboine rivers. The resulting borders of the colony were oddly shaped, but the rivers were far more important than the plains at this point in time. The establishment of the riverland colony marked the beginning of the end of the northwest as a fur trade reserve.

**The Selkirk Settlers**

The strategic location of the Red River Colony made it an ideal location for the seat of power in the whole of the northwest. Huge buffalo herds and the soil and climate for agriculture helped Red River supply fur traders with provisions. The colony's location at the **crossroads** of water routes running hundreds or even thousands of miles in all directions made it strategic. To the east was the route to Canada through Lake Winnipeg, the Winnipeg River, Lake of the Woods, and the Great Lakes. Down the river north was the way to Norway House, York Factory, and the Saskatchewan River and the interior of the northwest. To go west across the plains to the Rockies and beyond the Assiniboine River was ideal. To the south, there was the route to Minnesota. Fur traders built forts at the Forks of the Red and Assiniboine since the days of La Vérendrye. When the HBC and the NWC merged in 1821, the Forks became its headquarters in the northwest.

**Government**

Political power in the northwest was centred on the Forks. **George Simpson** administered the northwest from Red River as Governor of the Northern Department of Rupert's Land after 1821. He continued there for a few years after he became Governor-in-Chief of the HBC in 1826. That same year, he purposed to move his administrative centre into present-day St. Andrews to avoid flooding. He had **Lower Fort Garry** constructed in **1830**. Alongside direct fur trade activities was the **Council of Assiniboia (1821-1870)**.

A number of influential men from Red River North served in the colony's government. **Thomas Bunn**, and Alexander Black McKenzie came from St. Clements. Bunn was appointed to the Council of Assiniboia and served as "Secretary of State" in Louis Riel's provisional government. He was elected to the Manitoba legislature after Confederation. McKenzie was a fur trader. From St. Andrews came **Donald Gunn**, **Alfred Boyd**, and John Black. Gunn was a delegate to the Convetion of Forty and afterwards sat on the Legislative Council of Manitoba. Boyd was also a delegate to the convention, but, unlike Bunn, he opposed Riel's program. Boyd later became the first premier of Manitoba (although the government was largely directed by the lieutenant governor). Black was part of the negotiating team for Red River in Ottawa during Manitoba's entry into Confederation. From St. Peters came **Thomas Spence** and Rev. Henry Cochrane. Spence was a delgate to the convention who had formerly been involved with the small and short-lived Republic of Manitobah at Portage la Prairie. Cochrane sat on the convention and went on to be a missionary and teacher in northern areas.

As Manitoba joined Confederation, Red River North was found at the centre of a province of one of the world's largest countries. The steady inflow of settlers created opportunity for business. Winnipeg became a major city as a result of its rail yards, but north of the capital many continued to rely on the waterways for their work. New settlers came to Manitoba by rail, but made their living on the river and lake in the employment of entrepreneurs based at Selkirk.

**D) The Port of Selkirk**

**Local Political Figures**

Selkirk's strategic position made it the best place for a city that could control the river and lake business of Manitoba. First, it was located below the **St. Andrews Rapids**. Before Lockport Lock and Dam opened in **1910**, the shallow, rocky rapids obstructed ships sailing from Winnipeg to the lake. Between Selkirk and the lake, however, the way was clear. Second, Selkirk sat on **high ground** that was safe from flooding. This was the same advantage that appealed to Gov. Simpson in the Lower Fort Garry site. Selkirk's elevation led to a third reason it was a strategic site. The high ground attracted the eye of Sanford Fleming when he surveyed the route of the Candian Pacific Railway (CPR). Selkirk was born as a railway boom town when land speculators staked their claims to what was supposed to be the capital of Manitoba. When boom turned to bust as the railway turned south, civic leaders refocused on the town's docks and obtained a railway branch line from Winnipeg. Selkirk now had access by water to the whole of Lake Winnipeg, and by rail to Winnipeg and the rest of Canada and the United States. It was made a strategic shipping point for lake goods and the commercial hub of Red River North. A fourth reason Selkirk's site was advantageous for boat traffic was that the **East Slough** and the **West Slough** provided safe wintering harbours for boats.

**Selkirk's strategic situation**

The first steambot in Manitoba was the ***S.S. Anson Northrup***, so named for American Captain Anson Northrup. Northrup purchased the Mississippi steamboat *North Star*, disessembled it, and hauled it to the Red River in **1859** to win the prize offered by the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce to the first man to put a steamboat on the Red. Railways were swiftly rendering steamboats on the Mississippi obsolete. Gov. George Simpson and the HBC would not pay Northrup's high freight rates, however. Simpson made an agreement with the Burbank Brothers to buy the boat from Northrup, and the HBC then directly acquired it in 1861. The *Anson Northrup* sank in Cook's Creek, East Selkirk, that same year.

**The first steamboat**

The *Anson Northrup*'s boiler survived to be used on the ***Chief Commissioner*** (built in **1872**). The HBC intended the new boat to compete with free traders on the Saskatchewan River, but had to scale back its plans when the boat proved unsuitable for those waters. Instead, *Chief Commissioner* ran to Grand Rapids and back. Despite its short career, the *Chief Commissioner* had the honour of being the first steamboat to operate consistently on Lake Winnipeg.

The second lake steamer was the ***Colvile***. She was launched in **1875**. The *Colvile* carried fish and freight until she burned at Grand Rapids in 1894. In 1875, she carried Lt.-Gen. **Alexander Morris** and his party for Treaty Five negotiations. In 1877, she ferried **Lord and Lady Dufferin** during their visit to Manitoba. In 1885, she helped transport troops to put down the **North-West Rebellion** in Saskatchewan. *Colvile*'s success helped establish Selkirk as the hub of lake steamboat navigation. Colvile Landing, built on the East Slough by the HBC in 1880, was named in honour of the boat.

**First lake steamboat**

***S.S. Colvile***

The most memorable lake empires were built by the private enterprise of merchants like **William Robinson**, William Purvis, and Theodore Burrows. Robinson launched his first steamboat in **1880** after scoping out potential business on the lake from the decks of the *Colvile* during its maiden voyage. He co-founded the **Northwest Navigation Company**, managed the **Dominion Fish Company**, and owned the **William Robinson Company**. Robinson bought up fishing and lumbering business all around Lake Winnipeg and consolidated them into an efficient network. His boats hauled fish and lumber to the docks at Selkirk for shipment by rail to markets in Winnipeg, Canada, and the United States. They also carried mail, freight, and passengers.

**Lake barons**

**William Purvis** and his cousin **Joe Simpson** started competing with Robinson in the early twentieth century. They joined with three others to found the **Northern Fish Company**. Purvis settled in Selkirk after passing through on his way to the Yukon gold fields. Purvis and his sons became famous for **shipbuilding**. Simpson became Selkirk's eight mayor (1907-1910).

**Theodore Arthur Burrows** had considerable success in the lumber industry. Burrows formed the **Selkirk Lumber Company** in **1883**. It was one of the most successful lumber businesses in Manitoba. It cut four million feet of boards a year. Burrows had lumber holdings across the west, but became known especially for his activities in western Manitoba. He was instrumental in opening up the Dauphin area to settlement. From 1926 to 1929, he served as Manitoba's tenth lieutenant governor.

In the twentieth century, technological advance meant that railway and road transportation could easily outcompete boats. Agricultural development on the prairies also brought settlers inland from the waterways. Today, Manitobans ply the Red River and Lake Winnipeg on cruises or small pleasure craft or escape for the weekend to cabin country on one of the province's thousands of lakes. The legacy of the marine pioneers, however, remains. HBC men, missionaries, settlers, and entrepreneurs laid the basis of the province on its waterways. They did so especially in Red River North.

**E) Riverland today**