

The Uncelebrated Boats of the Albany

BY JOHN A. ALWIN

*A doctoral student with the Department of Geography at the University of Manitoba,
Mr Alwin is researching the H B C transportation system prior to 1821.*

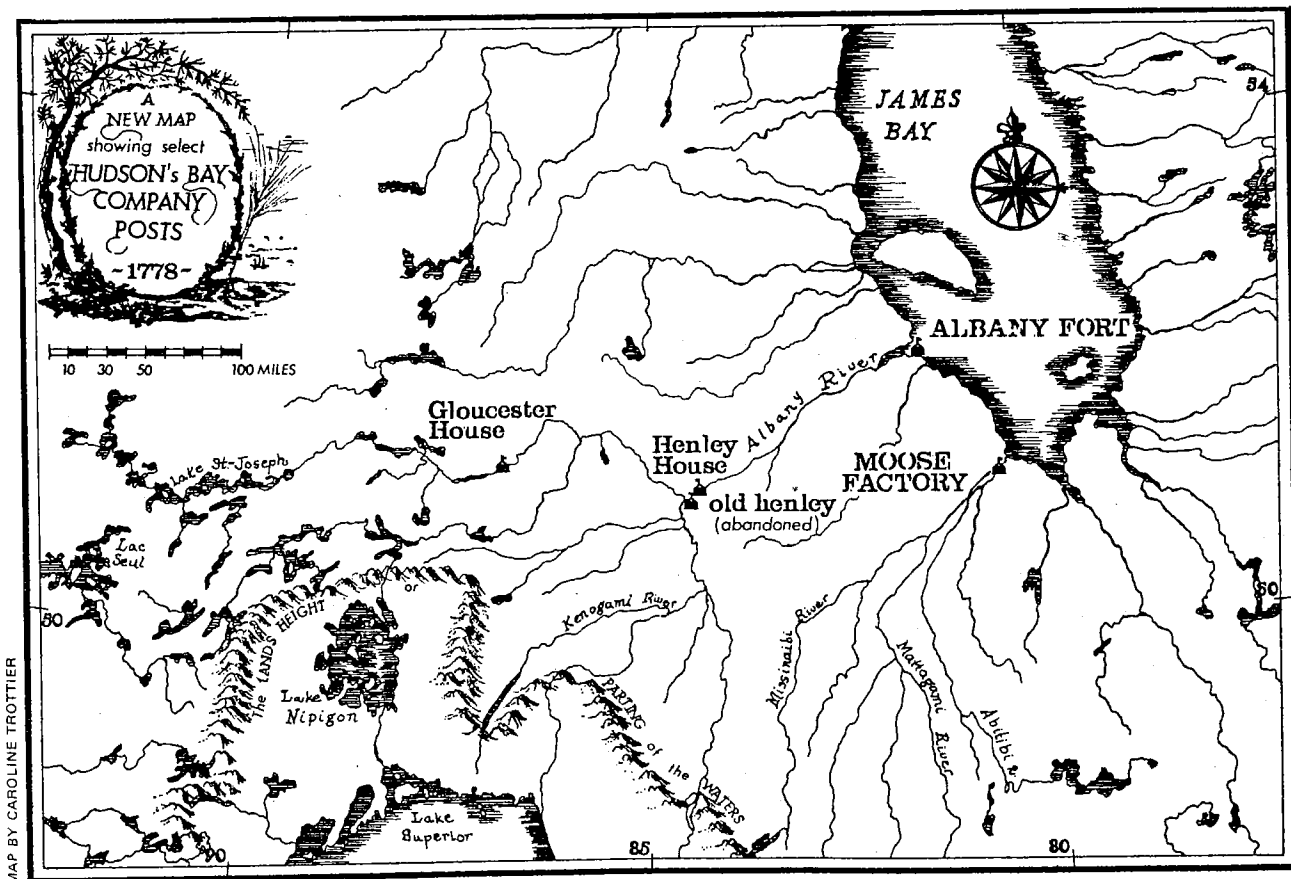
Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Hudson's Bay Company for permission to quote from its Archives.

ON 28 MAY 1746 a sole wooden craft arrived at Henley House, 160 water-miles upriver from Albany Fort. Designed and built at Albany, this craft was the Company's first wooden boat to navigate a river within Rupert's Land. In the years that followed, other types of wooden vessels were routinely used both inland from Albany and from other Bayside posts. They eventually became the mainstay of the Company's long-distance inland transportation system, carrying trade to the limits of Rupert's Land and beyond.

The story of transport on the Albany River began with the founding of Henley House. By the early 1740s inundation of Albany's trading hinterland by opposition French traders had already been tolerated for years. This competition, with the French culling the more desirable pelts, had reduced both the quantity and quality of furs traded at Albany. Finally, in the spring of 1743, Albany Chief Joseph Isbister decided that further French encroachment would not go unchallenged. On 6 May of that year, Isbister recorded in his Albany post journal that 'these french fellows is not above 60 mile up this river [Albany River]'. Indians arriving at Albany

Fort that spring reported the French traders were operating out of temporary log tents, but planned to return in the fall 'with four large lugage Cannos & build a factory house'. Chief Isbister was convinced a French trading post with such proximity and at so strategic a site would be intolerable. The situation required immediate action, and Isbister decided the only way to counter was for the Company itself to swiftly build its own house at the location. He was certain that if the French were allowed to obtain such a footing they would intercept and force all Bay-bound Indians to trade with them, and foresaw a continued decrease from the present trade of approximately 10,000 Made Beaver annually to 1,000 Made Beaver. Lacking sufficient time to communicate with the London-based headquarters, and certain that an inland outpost was required, Isbister, on his own initiative, sent a young Company servant inland with four Indians to verify the reports of the Indian informants.

The boy Dingley returned ten days later to report he had located the French site, and that the river was 'Navigable for flats & Cannos fine and pleasant with no



for inland service and their reported lack of skill in handling canoes, Company servants did as early as 1744, operate canoes for most of the Henley journey, with only occasional Indian assistance. In September of that year, seven Company men and two Indians departed for Henley in three canoes. This would have required that at least one canoe was paddled solely by Company servants. A primary job of the two Indians was probably steering the canoes through areas of rapid water. This was the case the next summer when seven Englishmen in three canoes departed for Henley accompanied by two Indians 'to Steer their Cannoes and mend them if required'.

Joseph Isbister complained in his Albany post journal on 16 September 1745, of the constant necessity of having to replace the delicate birch canoes which were 'Spoiled and broake' after only one trip owing to the servants' 'Unskillfullness', and indicated he would attempt to build a boat 'to draw as little watter as a Canno and Carie more goods so that our men may learn to manage them'. A desire to eliminate dependence on the Indians for canoes and assistance on the Henley route was an additional factor favouring the adoption of boats.

Few specifics on the construction of this craft, the Company's first inland boat, were recorded. Work began on 20 September when men were sent to the woods adjacent to Albany to gather 'Crocked timber' for the boat. The next day the carpenters were busily employed preparing timber and planing boards. The bottom was nailed together on 27 September. Three days later additional timber was required and ten men were dispatched to the woods with a cart, which Isbister also took credit for designing. Work on the vessel continued

into October. Half-inch board was sawed for its sides on 10 October and by 26 October the craft was finished except for caulking, which was postponed until spring. During its construction and for the next several years, the vessel was referred to as the 'flatt', 'flatt bottom barge', 'flatt bottom boat', 'flat boat', 'barge', or simply, the 'boat'. The more revealing of these terms, and the reference during its construction to sides and bottom as distinct sections, suggest that this elementary craft lacked the more intricate building details of the later York boat. Yet, like its illustrious successor, this earliest of inland boats proved more durable than canoes, required less manpower in proportion to amount of cargo carried, and was more readily handled by Company servants.

On 14 May 1746 the vessel, with a crew of five and a cargo of goods and provisions, left Albany on its maiden passage upriver. The voyage to Henley took fifteen days and the return three days. Although undoubtedly delighted with the safe arrival of his barge back at Albany on 31 May, Isbister succinctly recorded in his post journal 'ye boat did Verry well for the Voyage'. Five days later he sent the barge on a second trip to Henley and again it performed well, cutting the upriver trip to thirteen days and equalling the three-day return.

Despite the fact that canoes were ultimately used that fall when shallow water forced the abandonment of the barge Joseph Isbister was satisfied with his new mode of conveyance and had another barge built at Albany that winter. The use of crooked timber in the building of the first barge may suggest it had some curved lines. This was definitely the case with the second barge. Noting the difficulty his men were having bending plank with an open fire, the governor instructed that a lead soaking-

For two hundred years birch-bark canoes carried the Company's inland freight on the rivers flowing into Hudson Bay. This photograph was taken in the James Bay district in 1913.



J. W. ANDERSON

