

# The Uncelebrated Boats of the Albany

BY JOHN A. ALWIN

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Mr Alwin is researching the H B C transportation system prior to 1821.*

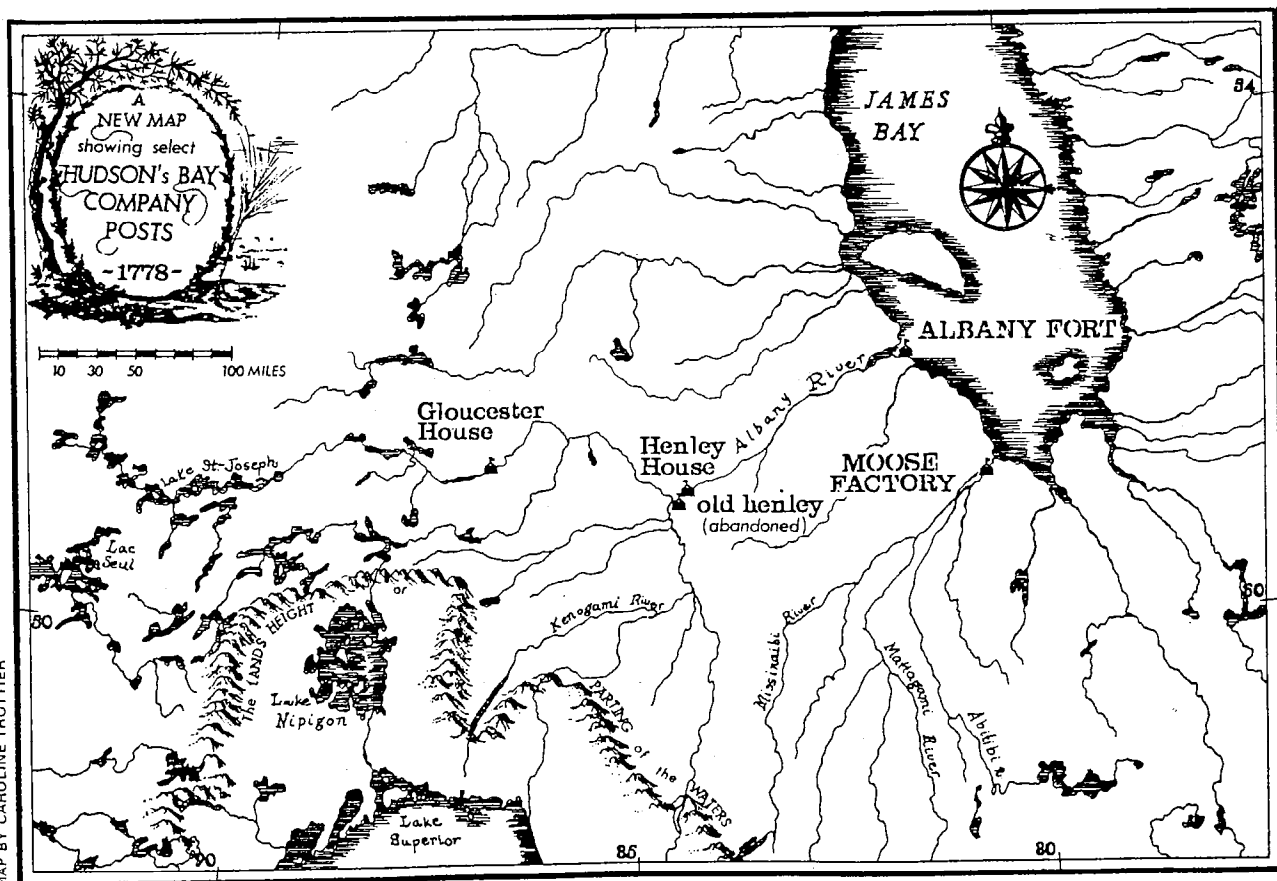
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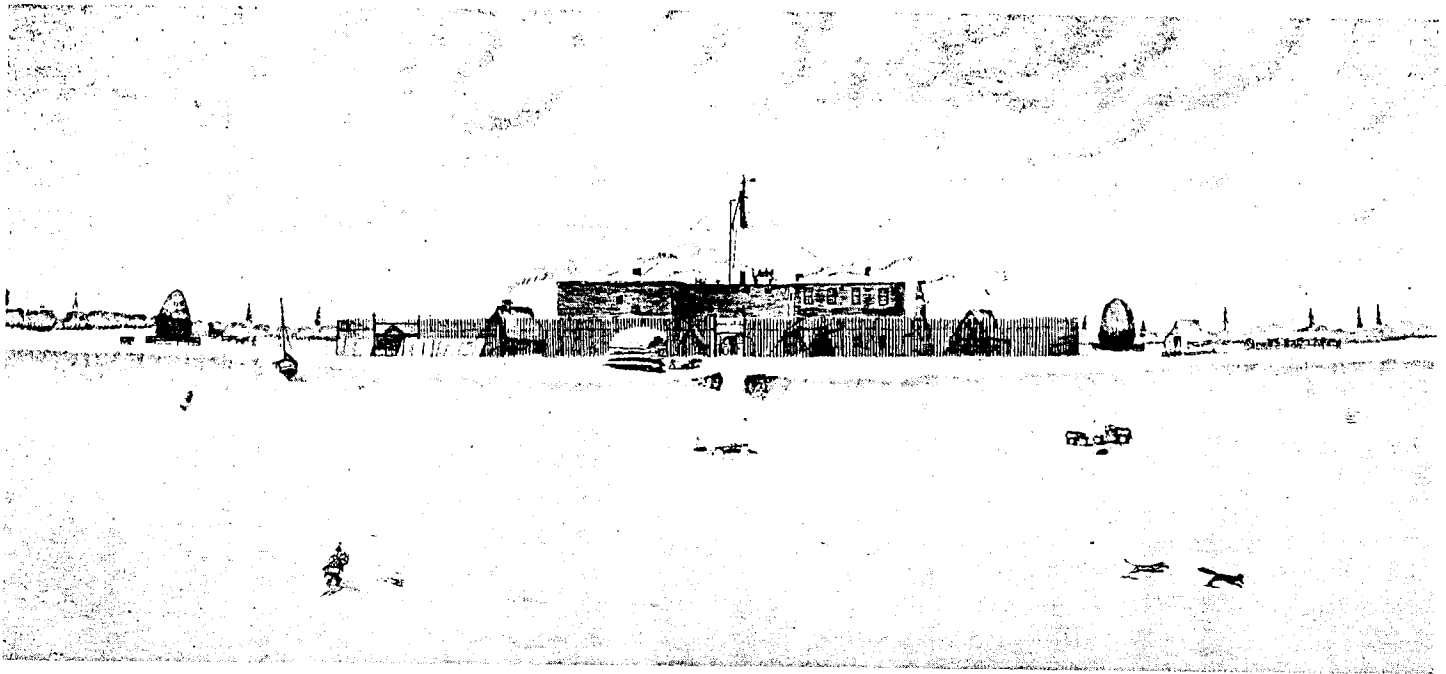
ON 28 MAY 1746 a sole wooden craft arrived at Henley House, 160 water-miles upriver from Albany Fort. Designed and built at Albany, this craft was the Company's first wooden boat to navigate a river within Rupert's Land. In the years that followed, other types of wooden vessels were routinely used both 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





*A south-east view of Albany Factory from a water-colour by William Richards, c. 1805.  
The artist was the grandson of William Richards who re-established Henley House in 1766.*

land Carring all the way up'. On 3 June 1743, only four days after receiving Dingley's report, Joseph Isbister led a flotilla of canoes upriver to establish an outpost. The group reached the site of the abandoned French log tents on 13 June, but continued on another several miles to a more favourable location at the junction of the Albany and Kenogami Rivers where they erected Henley House, the Company's first inland establishment.

The new post was not to function as a major trading centre, and did not represent a revision of the Company's long-established policy of requiring Indians to travel to the shore of Hudson Bay to trade. A primary function of the outpost was, by its mere presence, to keep the French from settling there, or in the immediate vicinity. It was, as described in a 9 May 1743 letter sent by Isbister to his counterpart at Moose Factory, to serve as 'a garison on ye fruntter'. In addition, the post was designed to function as a showroom for Company wares which could be obtained at Albany. It also served as a rest station for trading Indians travelling to and from Albany, and it soon became customary for Indians to stop and smoke a free pipe of tobacco and, on occasion, to spend the night. Trade at the outpost, carried on in large part to assist Indians enroute to and from the Bay and to help maintain them during winters, was small, ranging from 400 to 1,300 Made Beaver annually until 1755. Guns, powder, shot, cloth, and tobacco were the primary items traded.

Henley's operation, even in its limited capacity, required that its men be adequately provisioned and supplied with goods from the Bay, and that furs traded there be carried down to Albany. Now, after having left

the difficult problem of inland transportation to the Indians for seventy years, the Company was forced to develop its transport line inland.

Small Indian-built birch-bark canoes were logically the first craft used on the water road in from Albany. But after having travelled up the Albany River with his men to establish Henley, Isbister concluded that Company servants were 'intirly Unhandy in Canoes'. The distance from Albany to Henley was too great for the Englishmen, considering their ineptness in handling canoes, their advanced age, and their inability to provide for themselves while inland. Despite these problems, an outpost at this site was seen as essential to preserving Albany's trade, and a regular carriage had to be established to support it.

If communication with his new outpost was to be by canoe, it was obvious to Isbister that the standard small variety of canoe with its limited cargo capacity would be inadequate for freighting purposes. Within two weeks of the post's establishment, he had a 'Great' canoe specially built by Indians in exchange for a gallon of brandy. This canoe performed well that spring, and by fall Isbister arranged to have another built, again for a gallon of brandy. Other canoes reported to have been twenty-four to twenty-eight feet long and four feet wide were subsequently added to the service. These could carry a heavy cargo and still only draw eight inches of water.

Transport problems were not solved by merely using larger canoes. Company servants were not eager to travel inland and on occasion refused such service; some men were returned to England for refusing to work on the Henley route. Despite their obvious lack of enthusiasm

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.

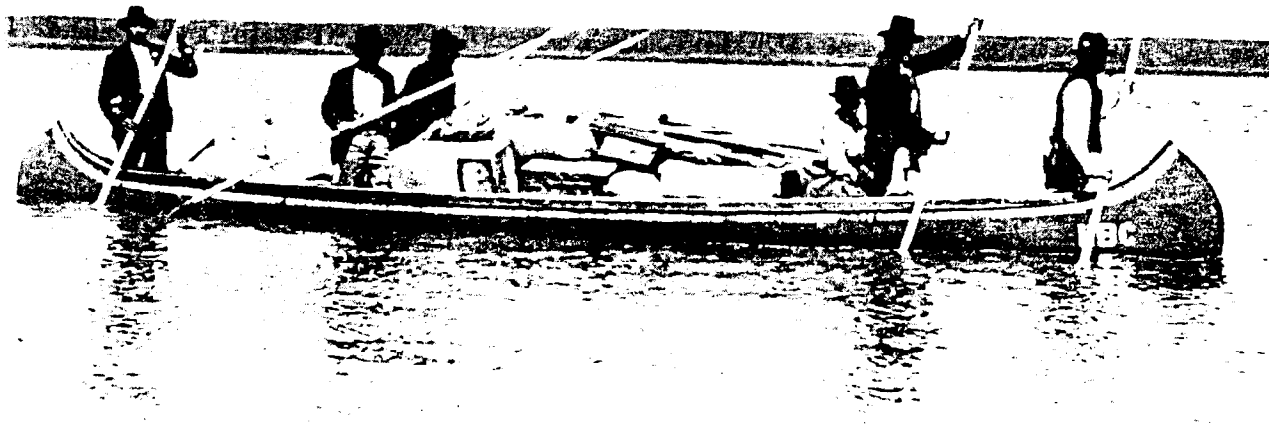
Few specifics on the construction of this craft, the Company's first inland boat, were recorded. Work began on 20 September when men were sent to the woods adjacent to Albany to gather 'Crocked timber' for the boat. The next day the carpenters were busily employed preparing timber and planing boards. 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.*



trough be built in which boards could first be boiled. Constructed of one-inch poplar plank and painted, the second barge measured 23 feet long by 6 feet 4 inches wide. Both barges were used on the Henley route the next spring. In subsequent references the two craft were identified as the small and the large barge; the larger required a minimum crew of six, and the smaller, five. It appears that the second barge was the larger of the two. A third barge, built of both poplar and pine-root timber, was constructed during the spring and fall of 1748. These same craft also began to be referred to as 'Henley Boats' or 'Henley Barges' when George Spence temporarily replaced Joseph Isbister as commander at Albany between 1748 and 1753.

Rudder-equipped, these boats were propelled by oars and setting poles or, if necessary, were tracked. They were also outfitted with sails which were frequently used on the broad and gentle lower reach of the Albany River. Now the standard mode for supplying Henley, these boats usually made one or two round trips each spring, and one additional trip in the fall after the arrival of the ship from England. The first spring trip, usually by two boats, departed Albany in mid to late May, after the river was clear of ice. If required, one or two boats made a second trip. Spring runs carried the bulk of Henley's supply of trade goods and provisions up to the outpost, and conveyed its fur returns down to Albany. With the high water-levels on the Albany River at this season of the year, boat communication was possible

every spring from the initial trip in 1746 to the last spring run prior to the 1755 abandonment of Henley House. These trips became routine and in four consecutive years during the early 1750s, departure and arrival dates at Albany did not vary more than four days. In the spring of 1753 the round-trip travel time from Albany to Henley was cut to eleven days, including a one-day lay-over at Henley.

As experienced in 1746 on the first attempt to get to Henley in the fall, low water-levels made boat communication more uncertain. Still it became standard procedure to make at least one attempt each fall although these trips, usually made by a single boat, were not as critical to Albany's inland commerce. Their primary function was to convey the Master of Henley to his winter station and to lodge a small cargo of goods at the outpost.

The main obstacle to river navigation was the Great Falls about twelve miles upriver from Albany Fort. In the spring of the year when water-levels were high, it was generally possible to avoid the falls by detouring around them via a small parallel channel of the river. This passage was usually only a trickle in the fall and boats had to pass directly up the main channel of the Albany River. On these journeys the crew was increased by several men, and extra hands were sent to assist the boat over the falls. When it proved impossible to communicate with Henley by boat, the Company was reluctantly forced to rely on the less-efficient canoes.

The problems of fall communication with Henley were soon overshadowed by events at the post itself. In the spring of 1755, Indians, disgruntled with what they felt were unnecessary restrictions of their access to the post, attacked Henley, killing the men and ransacking the post. Even though Joseph Isbister was eager to see his outpost resettled and had platforms for gun-carriages mounted on the boats that summer in preparation for travelling inland, no immediate action was taken. Not until the spring of 1759, at the height of the Seven Years' War, did fifteen Company men and two Indians finally reach the site to begin rebuilding the post. During the summer a 'Square House' was built, but on 17 September 1759, a combined force of Indians and French overran the post, killing the carpenter, wounding another man, and bringing work to a halt.

The need for Henley diminished with the eventual defeat of the French in this war and their withdrawal from their western trading posts. The post was not promptly resettled.

The void left by the retreat of the French was soon filled by a new breed of Montreal trader referred to by H B C men as the 'Pedlars', because they, like the French before them, took the trade to the Indians. With competition renewed inland, the services of Henley House once again became essential, and the post was finally re-established in the summer of 1766. The reluctance of Company servants to go inland and low water-levels had

*The Albany River 'peppered with great boulders - thousands of them' as it was in the summer of 1923.*



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thwarted earlier attempts. Although William Richards, the officer in charge of the founding mission, had been instructed to go 'as high as Henley, or as much higher as Possible', he chose an island site five miles downriver from old Henley House for the new outpost. An insular location, he felt, would afford a good view both up and down the river, important for a post which had been twice destroyed by the surprise attack of enemies.

With service restored on the Henley route, boats again became the standard mode of conveyance. Henley boats by this time were referred to individually by name: *Prince of Wales*, *Committee*, and *King George*. This practice clearly suggests that these craft were now recognized as permanent features of Albany's inland service.

New Henley, like the older, was not to be a regular place of trade. This was made clear in the summer of 1766 when William Richards, then Master of Henley House, wrote to Humphrey Marten, Chief at Albany requesting trading goods in greater quantity and variety for his outpost. Responding to this request Marten wrote: '... in regard of Trading Goods, You Know it is their Honors Possitive Orders, not to Supply You with a Generall Assortment of Goods, but only to send such articles as Guns, Powder, Shot, Flints, & a small Quantity of Brandy'. The Master at Henley was instructed to inform the Indians that the post had been resettled 'out of Love to them, to keep them from Starving, and to Assist them in their Passage up and Down the river, and also in the Winter'. Indians were to be told that the

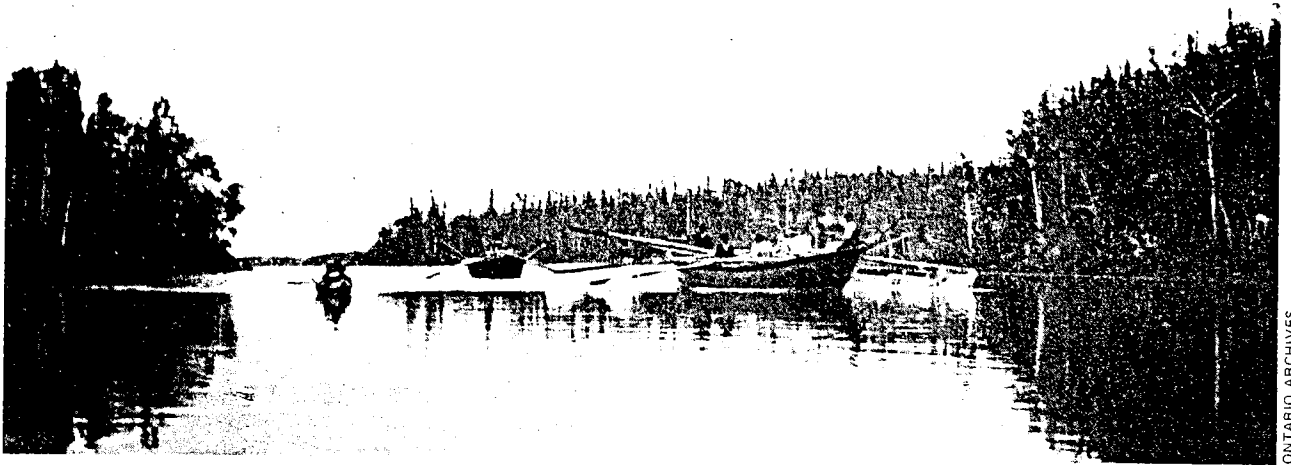
difficult passage for boats made it impossible for the Company to make Henley a place of trade. At the time it was a formidable task to provision the post's small complement of eight men and to stock it with even its limited amount and variety of trading goods. Marten felt that if Henley were made a regular place of trade twelve large boats would be needed to provision it, and each one would have to make three round trips annually. With such a fleet and the required men, he still doubted that it would be possible to supply Henley with enough goods to sustain an annual 8,000 skin trade, even if Henley House were self-sufficient in foodstuffs.

The difficulty of the fall trip to Henley still plagued transport on the water road in from Albany. Twenty-three men, making the attempt every day for a number of days, were not able to get even an empty boat over the Great Falls on the trip up to Henley in the fall of 1768. Four canoes were eventually used to deposit a small supply of essentials at the outpost. Three years later on a return fall trip from Henley, the boat was stopped 100 miles upriver from Albany where the river became so shoal that a man could cross it 'dry foot'.

Transport and trade on the Albany River acquired new significance in the mid and late 1770s. In 1774 the establishment of Cumberland House, the Company's first true trading post in the interior, ushered in a new phase of Company history. The century-old policy of requiring the Indians to travel to the Company's tide-water posts was abandoned in favour of a more aggressive policy of inland expansion designed to carry trade

*Martin Falls, one of the navigational hazards on the Albany, from a 1905 photograph in the Ontario Archives.*





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*The early 'flatt bottom boat' lacked the more intricate building details of the later York boats, shown here on the Albany River, 1905.*

to the Indians. Consistent with this policy, the Governor and Committee, in their official correspondence of 11 May 1774, instructed the Chief at Albany to consider the expediency of extending trade to Henley House and further inland. The next year when its previous trading ceiling of ten Made Beaver per Indian was lifted, and unlimited trading was permitted, Henley became the Company's second genuine inland trading post. To carry out its Henley initiative the London Committee more than doubled the complement of men at the outpost from eight to twenty, and assured the Chief at Albany that a larger supply of trading goods and provisions would be furnished. As an inducement to many of the Indians to continue carrying their furs down to the Bay and thereby 'lessen the quantity of Trading Goods, which is convey'd with so much difficulty to Henley', the outpost was to trade at a higher standard than its parent post of Albany. Henley was also forbidden to designate and clothe its own Indian lieutenants and captains. Only a select number of Indians who regularly led parties to trade at a particular post were granted such honorary titles and the associated fancy dress, special treatment, and favours. Since designation of leaders was essential to maintaining a large and regular trade at a post, the decision to bar their use at Henley was another obvious attempt to limit the trade and thereby further lessen the load of inland carriage required.

Henley House was now designated as operations centre for inland exploration and expansion. From this forward outpost, five or six men were to regularly travel and explore the country and to persuade Indians to trade with the Hudson's Bay Company. Lake St. Anns (Lake Nipigon) was singled out as one particular area to be explored, but men were also directed to range much

more widely: to Lake Superior, Michilimackinac, and even Montreal. Clearly the explorative element of these excursions was preparatory to expansion of transport and trade. Men travelling in from Henley were to 'Search the Rivers, & Lakes, & Observe their Connections, Source, Course, Dept, & other particulars and take a Plan of them as exact as possible'. Since rivers and lakes were the roadways of the trade, such ventures were to provide the maps necessary for a continued advance of Company trade.

The increased interaction between Albany and Henley, to convey up the larger indent of trading goods and provisions and to carry down the larger fur returns, required more boats. In the fall and winter of 1775, the Master at Henley was instructed to send to Albany birch crooks and keels needed for the building of new boats. The expanded program of boat building and repair at Albany Fort that winter required the erection of a kiln for steaming the boards and planks.

With a clear mandate for expansion inland, an immediate attempt was made to see how far above Henley boats could navigate. When the Master at Henley reported the disappointing news that 'tis impossible to get a loaded or a half loaded boat, more than 9 miles above Old Henley', Thomas Hutchins, Chief at Albany instructed him to try canoes. The Chief had not, however, abandoned the hope of using boats on the river above Henley, and the next spring sent up the *Experiment*, a specially built craft which was smaller than the standard Henley Boat, for possible future use.

The year 1777 was an important one for Albany's inland theatre. That spring John Kipling led a canoe party 230 miles up the Albany River above Henley to establish the forward outpost of Gloucester House. The

Albany Chief was particularly eager to push inland at this time. Reports indicated that the War of American Independence had caused Great Britain to cut off commerce with the colonies, and Montreal traders had therefore not sent their normal shipment of goods inland. In order to 'avail themselves of this Opportunity' servants were to immediately proceed further into the interior and occupy Pedlar sites. It was hoped that a number of inland posts could be established and these possible locations included posts on Woody Lake (Lake of the Woods), Rainy Lake, and Lake Winnipeg. At this time these favoured sites were beyond the range of Albany's inland transportation system. As events would soon show, Gloucester House itself was beyond the transport capabilities for the first years of its operation.

The same year, 1777, Henley House was raised one more notch towards the status of a full-fledged trading post when permitted to trade on the Albany standard. The outpost still was not allowed to designate Indian leaders. The Committee in London had evidently decided that the transport line between Henley and Albany could now handle an increased flow, but was not yet ready to accommodate all Bay-bound Indians passing Henley.

With inland transport now assuming a more important role, the London Committee, in 1777, introduced a gratuity system for service inland from Albany. Retroactive to the year ending in August 1776, each man who travelled to Henley or further inland was to receive a gratuity of 40 shillings annually. The average annual salary of labourers was £8. The following year the system was modified to allow each man 10 shillings for every return journey from Albany to Henley House and 40 shillings for travel beyond Henley House.

While Henley was advanced to a standard of trade equal to Albany's, Gloucester House was to retain the older, more stringent standard. Transport above Henley was still precarious at this time and could not handle the volume of cargo which would have resulted from a more liberal standard of trade. The difficulties of provisioning the outpost were evident in its first year of operation. After having made do with inadequate provisions since the founding of the post and, on occasion, having been compelled to consume the inside rind of aspen, John Kipling and his three men were finally forced to temporarily withdraw from Gloucester on 28 November 1777. Twelve days later they arrived at Henley House 'Almost Dead for the Want of Victuals'.

In May 1779 when trading Indians began arriving at Gloucester House, necessary goods were not in stock. The number of Indians awaiting the arrival of the trade items from Albany soon swelled, crowded the post, and prevented Company employees from holding their normal Sunday services. When goods finally arrived on 1 July some Indians had been waiting thirty days, while others had evidently given up and left. That spring, the *Experiment* had been used on the Henley to Gloucester

trip, but failed to reach Gloucester. The boat was abandoned enroute, and canoes were used to ferry its cargo the remaining distance.

Fur returns at Gloucester House increased from 302 Made Beaver in its first year of operation to over 2,300 for the 1779-80 season. The latter figure did not even include Gloucester's share of a total of 2,055 Made Beaver left at Albany's two interior posts that year because of shoal water and lack of provisions. This inability to convey all returns down to Albany, the failure of the *Experiment* to reach Gloucester, and the reliance on fragile canoes of generally inadequate size all pointed to the need for swift solutions if the present trade was to be retained and extended.

In 1780, bateaux were first used on the Albany River. In the years that followed, these shallow draft vessels revolutionized Albany's inland transportation system. Although the bateaux eventually carried Albany's grand incursion into the eastern corner of the Canadian prairies, it was the earlier boats, dating back to the 1740s which first proved the feasibility of using wooden craft inland from the Bay. While the French still occupied their posts in the western fur forest, these vessels regularly plied the lower reach of the Albany River. Thus, more than 40 years before the earliest use of boats inland from York Factory in the 1780s and 1790s, Albany Fort's inland transport was served by these, the uncelebrated boats of the Albany River. ♦

*One of the Company's birch-bark canoes is patched at Big Sandy Lake during a tour of the posts in northern Ontario, 1905.*



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