

The Counting House

Nerve Center of Company Operations

Profit. Fort Vancouver existed to make a profit for its British shareholders.

As headquarters for the Hudson's Bay Company's Columbia Department, and with responsibility for more than one thousand employees and two dozen forts, Company clerks needed space to track operations. The office provided that space; it served as the financial and administrative nerve center of Company operations in the Columbia Department.

When the Hudson's Bay Company constructed Fort Vancouver, an office was one of the first structures built. Known also as a counting house, a term for buildings that housed bookkeeping functions, it stood several yards to the southwest of this structure. By 1845, the building's deteriorating condition prompted the Company to construct a new office. Completed in December 1845, its clapboard siding, interior and exterior paint, and Hudson's Bay Company coat of arms reflected its vital role in Company operations.



Company clerks placed weights on scales to measure gold dust and other items. This one pound weight, dated 1826, was recovered in a site archaeological dig. Being much heavier than weights listed on the fort inventories, its use remains a mystery.

The arrival of *HMS Modeste*, a British warship, changed Company plans for the structure. Chief Factor John McLoughlin decided to house the ship's captain, Thomas Baillie, in the building for his 18-month peacekeeping assignment at Fort Vancouver.

Following Baillie's departure in 1847, clerks labored inside the building for more than a decade, verifying tons of incoming and outgoing goods, tracking employee pay, and recording

purchases by employees, American Indians, and later, American settlers. Each year clerks produced a volume of records so great that employees needed a cart to transport records from the office to a London bound ship. The pages told a year's story of toil, sweat, and long hours of all Company employees -- and of course, the profit.



"It is needless to describe the agonies I endured while sitting, hour after hour, on a long-legged stool, my limbs quivering for want of their accustomed exercise, while the twittering of birds, barking of dogs, lowing of cows, and neighing of horses seemed to invite me to join them in the woods."

Robert Ballantyne
Clerk at York Factory, 1843-1845

"I am suffering much from sore eyes brought on by working too much in the office by candlelight."

Thomas Lowe, Clerk

March, 1849
8:45 p.m.

Through blurry eyes, you check your pocket watch, briefly glancing from your candle lit ledgers. Eleven hours of copying inventory records today.

For the past several weeks, you and two fellow clerks have worked in this room, crouching over books, dipping the pen, copying fort inventory records by hand in triplicate. You have weighed hundreds of pounds of sugar, coffee, nails, flour, and black powder. You have measured nearly 26 miles of fabric in the stores. Counting all property at the fort -- including every spoon, dish, tool, trade good, and piece of furniture -- recording its condition, and establishing its value proves to be exhausting work, as attested by your aching neck, tired eyes and sore hand.

Yet, despite the tedium, you are proud of your profession, and proud to be a gentleman at Fort Vancouver. You earn a respectable salary, with yearly raises to be expected. With diligent work, you may be given charge of a post in ten more years. By summer, these long hours may lessen, leaving Friday and Saturday afternoons and Sundays your own, perhaps to ride, hunt, sail, or picnic. Maybe someone will organize another ball, like the ones Captain Baillie hosted in this very room. You could certainly use the exercise.

After a brief respite, you return to your work. Only six more pages to copy until you blow out the candle and drag yourself back to Bachelors Hall to sleep. This stool will hardly be cold when you return tomorrow at 6:30 a.m.

Drawings, photographs and paintings, such as this 1846 watercolor painted by Trevenen Coode, show locations and details of buildings that greatly assist in the reconstruction process.

Hudson's Bay Company Archives,
Provincial Archives of Manitoba