Celebrating The Stone Of Canada's Oldest Stone Fort

By Jennifer Bain
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Look for holes in the mortared Tyndal Stone at Lower Fort Garry National Historic Site.Gentle Rain

As people meander through Lower Fort Garry National Historic Site, engaging with costumed interpreters acting like they're living in a booming fur trade complex in the 1850s, I only have eyes for the inanimate stone walls.

This isn't just any ordinary limestone. The cream-colored Tyndal Stone is only found in Canada and specifically in Manitoba. It's a fossilized reef that was formed from the remains of ancient coral. Fragments from marine organisms found at the bottom of an ancient sea that once covered the province.

It's also the only Canadian stone designated by the International Union of Geological Sciences as a global heritage stone resource. That group, when adding Tyndal Stone to its prestigious list put this area (outside its Tyndal significance to humanity):

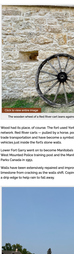


Inside Lower Fort Garry's stone walls is the town's old Governor's Residence, built between 1830 and 1832.Jennifer Bain

The stone was harvested in 1853 by Hudson's Bay Co. staff who quarried limestone from exposure along the banks of the Red River near Selkirk. The HBC immediately starting using what was then called "Selkirk Stone" to construct the fort's new walls. A year later it was used by the church and nearby St. John's Anglican Cathedral.

It took more than 70 years before a former digging a well found a major deposit and quarrying began in earnest. The stone was touted to the world's community of Tyndall — hence the name — but it stopped easy by rail. Once through the provincial capital of Winnipeg and push one's journey of Tyndall. Today, you can see Tyndal Stone in buildings throughout Winnipeg, from the Manitoba Legislature to the Provincial Archives to the Canadian embassy in Berlin and Canada House in London.

Lower Fort Garry, a short drive north of Winnipeg on the banks of the Red River, is a national historic site in part because it has one of the best collections of early stone buildings in western Canada. "Their design and craftsmanship are the pride of the story" interpretive signs reveal. "Their changing views are another"



Parks Canada crews work on one of Lower Fort Garry's stone bastions.Jennifer Bain

Lower Fort Garry was a fur trade post established by the HBC in 1830 as its administrative center, but it was also a place of refuge. In 1869 and 1870, it was occupied by Canadian militia during Métis political activities, and served as a more important point for fun and games.

While most European buildings between Lake Superior and the Pacific Ocean were constructed of wood during that era, the HBC forts, churches and houses in the Red River Settlement embraced local limestone.

I told how HBC Governor George Simpson loathed wood buildings, calling them "an best miserable fabrics" requiring annual repairs and constant renewals. Stone buildings, on the other hand, provided greater permanence, security and protection from the elements. Simpson's fort, Fort Vancouver, and Fort Victoria on Vancouver Island and Fort Langley on the mainland coastline were built by stonemasons Duncan McRae and John Clouston with help from laborers.



The massive stone walls of Fort Rae can best seen against a Tyndal Stone wall at Lower Fort Garry.Jennifer Bain

Mixed had its plume. of course. The fort used York boats to transport goods along its growing trade network. Red River carts — pulled by a horse, pony or ox — were equally important as York for trade transportation and have become a symbol of the Métis. I longer by examples of both these varieties just inside the forts stone walls.

Lower Fort Garry went on to become Manitoba's first penitentiary its first mental health facility, a York boat building facility, training camp and the Manitoba Motor Country Club before being donated to Parks Canada in 1951.

Walls have been extensively repaired and restored. Cladding in control joints prevented the limestone from crumbling as the walls shift. Coping stones were added to the top of the walls creating a drip edge to help rain to fall away.



Just outside the threatening walls of Lower Fort Garry National Historic Site is a painted tipi that honors residential school survivors.Jennifer Bain

The fort takes people back to the booming 1850s fur trade era with costumed interpreters, historical recreations, artifacts and storytelling.

I meet dip and mold candles into kitchen with Sharon Hogarth who has 15 hours where the complex was a working museum. I also met Jeff Leclerc, a Métis fiddler who was playing at a party in which a school girl learn about the Independent Red Ensign and heard the Tyndal Stone walls and other structures. At the fur loft, I finger the animal pelts that people brought to the HBC.



Parks Canada interpretation student Hannah Tarchinski, stands at Stakeholder Camp at Lower Fort Garry.Jennifer Bain

Indigenous groups occasionally visited the fort to trade, sell goods, work and visit relatives. They typically camped nearby in temporary birch bark dwellings.

The Gabeshiman Camp, with its birch bark wigwam and buffalo hide tipi, is housed within the complex and is where I learn about the Métis and their culture. I also met Hannah Tarchinski, a Parks Canada interpretation student. Hannah Tarchinsky about the fact that Lower Fort Garry is also where Treaty No. 1 — the first of the numbered treaties that allowed for the expansion of Canada — was signed on Aug. 3, 1871 and is also known as the "Stone Fort Treaty."

Canada, unfortunately, almost immediately began restricting peoples' treaty rights and subjected them to the federal Indian Act and other laws.



Treaty 1 is celebrated hidden in the southeast bastion at Lower Fort Garry.Jennifer Bain

Treaty No. 1, between the Crown and seven First Nations, is symbolized here by a Legacy Flag. Hannah Tarchinski, Parks Canada interpretation student, explained the significance role of the Métis in creating the province of Manitoba and in the confederation of Canada.

In my final minutes at the fort I do what the Parks Canada Spokane baseball urges kids to do and visit the northwest bastion and cross the walls for hours.

Two of the other bastions are blocked off for repairs but the southeast bastion isn't. Built as an icehouse, it has been structurally renovated into a fabulous modern washroom that's quickly hovered behind globally significant Tyndal Stone walls.

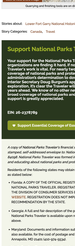


Historic Interpreter Hannah Desjardins sits on the porch of St. Andrew's Rectory, which is made of Tyndal Stone.Jennifer Bain

Not far south of Lower Fort Garry on the way back to Winnipeg I follow the Tyndal Stone story to St. Andrew's Rectory National Historic Site.

The first thing that historic interpreter Tash Thompson tells me is that the rectory was built in 1854 by Rev. William Cockran and well-known stonemason Duncan McRae (of Lower Fort Garry fame) using Tyndal Stone from the Lower Fort Garry quarry. Cockran was a missionary to the Cree people and was preoccupied by a fact from the roof. However, Thompson says "he was so knowledgeable about stone masonry and so passionate, that he got carried to the site each day to keep watch on the project and make sure everything was going as planned."

To backtrack, Protestant missionaries began arriving in the Red River in 1820 at the request of the HBC. Cockran was ordained in England in 1824 and arrived in the Red River in 1825 with his wife and son Andrew2. The colony grew by leaps and bounds and by 1851 there were 5,000 settlers. Lifestyle of the fur trade," interpretive signs explain. "He advocated a practical education: religious observance and European agriculture as the means to salvation."



St. Andrew's Anglican Church is a national historic site made of local limestone.Jennifer Bain

Cockran developed a mission along the Red River starting with wooden buildings — a rectory in 1829 and a church in 1831. As congregation grew, he was able to upgrade to a stone church in 1849 and then a stone rectory in 1854.

St. Andrew's is now the oldest stone church in western Canada that's still in active use. It's also one of the region's oldest surviving examples of Gothic Revival church architecture. Cockran was influenced by After British parish churches with a simple form, massive stone walls, small pointed windows, Its gorgeous leaning steeple roof and wooden interior.

The dark stone rectory sometimes feels a bit claustrophobic and is now protected as St. Andrew's Rectory National Historic Site. It's also the oldest surviving building in Manitoba and the oldest offcers of the Northern Bay Company" a plaque explains. "It reflects the style and character of important developing at company posts."



Apparently some of the masonry at St. Andrew's Rectory was done by the razor himself.Jennifer Bain

The tremendous history lies within roughly out by stone masons. A museum opened and Roland-wing at the corners and around doors and windows, but apparently Cockran did much of the rest. "When you're outside, look at the finishing of the stones and the mortar, and then go across the road and compare it to the stonework of the church," signage tells visitors. The church was done by stonemasons.

Exploring Clem's, and Saultteaching work. To split stone, people made holes with a drill and hammer, then put in at stone (feathers) with a wedge called a plug in between the holes. Hammering the wedges, listened the a crackling sound. Then stopped dark and watched the stone break.

The rectory now houses the St. Andrews Heritage Centre, which tells a sweeping story about the early days of the Red River Settlement, the Métis, the Selkirk Treaty, and a one-year-long community programs and a genealogy center on the site's seven acres.

There's an Métis's kitchen that has tons once hooked on stoves, and a Victorian parlour with mountain hair wreaths that were popular in that era — but limestone buffs will certainly be drawn to the vintage quarrying and finishing tools.

Quarrying and finishing tools on on display at St. Andrew's Rectory.Gentle Rain

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