

Studies in Documents

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In archival tradition, the study of documents has been known as diplomatic. The word has its origins in the Greek term diploma which meant "doubled" or "folded." By the Renaissance, diploma referred to certain classes of ancient documents which had been folded and sealed to protect confidentiality. Today, diploma is used as a general term for ancient and medieval documents of all kinds, and diplomatics is a primary component of the discipline of archives in Europe. The schools of the state archives in Italy, for example, are known as "Schools of Archival Science, Palaeography and Diplomatics." The editors of Archivaria want to encourage, through this new section of short articles, the study of modern archival records or, as English archivist Michael Cook said in Archivaria 7, "modern diplomatic." (p. 37)*

Diplomatics is the basis of archival science and service because it attempts to provide what must be known in order to locate, appraise, preserve, and employ archival documents. The subject embraces any information pertinent to this purpose and every kind of archival document and medium. Ultimately, diplomatics moves toward the goals of Hugh Taylor's course in the Master of Archival Studies programme at the University of British Columbia (entitled "Society and the Documentary Record") which, he says, "explores the nature of records through history, their impact on government, and the impact of the principal media of record on society and hence the user." (Archivaria 18, p. 11)

By Packtrain and Steamer: The Hudson's Bay Company's British Columbia District Manager's Correspondence, 1897-1920

by MARK WALSH

The records of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives document the relationship between transportation, communication, and efficient commercial operations over long distances. From the very beginning of the company's history, this relationship was apparent with the arrival of the annual ship at the bayside posts. It transported precious supplies, trade goods, and, as importantly, the written instructions of the Governor and Committee in London. As the English company moved inland, so too did written communications, which both animated and documented the story of the trading year in a number of

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different ways. The most detailed was the journal of daily events, sent to London annually. Often as detailed but much shorter in length were the many letters and reports chronicling the company's activities at the post and district levels. Finally, there were the commercial communications which stood so defenceless in lean years — the daily, monthly, and annual accounts. To understand fully the archives of the company, it is necessary to study the history of its records in their contemporary setting, as both the driving force at the leading edge of a substantial commercial empire and as an essential recording medium to allow for the follow-up, consolidation, and response to changed circumstances that such an empire had to make constantly to remain viable.

The material considered in the following pages represents only a minute portion of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA). The correspondence of the British Columbia District Manager amounts to less than thirty linear feet in an archives which has approximately six thousand feet of records. The correspondence is among the most recent HBCA holdings in the Victoria subgroup, which commences in the 1840s. The Victoria subgroup itself is only one of over five hundred subgroups of records on individual company trading establishments. Yet, although easily lost from a quantitative perspective, this group of administrative correspondence is an important demonstration of the company's records-keeping practices.

In the period following the 1870 Deed of Surrender, the Hudson's Bay Company operated in a totally new environment. The territory known as Rupert's Land and the Native, Metis, and European population there were no longer governed by the company, but by Ottawa. Although British Columbia was not part of the territory surrendered, it was nevertheless caught up in the company's difficulty in dealing with the highly competitive commercial atmosphere of the post-1870 Canadian West. It was a time of administrative and technological change as the company moved further and further away from traditional fur trade activities and closer to land ventures and retail operations. The HBC records for the period reflect this era of transition. Company records-keeping systems played an important role in that transition.

Company operations on the Pacific Coast had been headquartered in Victoria from the time of the Oregon Boundary Settlement, and much of present-day British Columbia came under its jurisdiction. From 1852 until 1892, this area had the same status as the company's other major geographic administrative units and was known as the Western Department. During those forty years Victoria communicated directly with London, and ships travelling between the two points increased as the former became a Pacific fur trade centre. The Western Department was twice deemed important enough to warrant the posting of an Assistant Commissioner at Victoria. Future Chief Commissioner James A. Grahame filled the position from 1871 until his promotion in 1874; the second person to hold the position was Thomas R. Smith, who had been Assistant Secretary in London.¹ His appointment should have reflected the stature which the Western Department had attained, but in reality was made to "reorganize the business of the Western Department."²

1 Thomas R. Smith had held the position of Assistant Secretary in the company's London headquarters before becoming Assistant Commissioner with the Western Department in 1886. As Assistant Secretary he could have expected, as many had, to succeed to the position of Secretary, a placement which was equivalent to a modern corporation's chief executive officer.

2 Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (hereafter HBCA), A.11/94b fos. 292-93. Letter, Thomas R. Smith to London Secretary William Armit, Victoria, 31 October 1891.

Smith's tenure in the position ended abruptly with the appointment of Clarence Campbell Chipman in 1891 as Chief Commissioner of the company in Canada.³ The new commissioner sought to rationalize the company's three divergent interests — land, fur trade, and saleshops — in one coherent administration. Chipman had not been a long-time company employee who had worked his way up through the ranks, and thus had less appreciation for the fur trade than many of the older company officers would have liked, and a much greater desire for change than many of them thought necessary. The stage was thereby set for the final struggle between the old guard of the fur trade (the "officers") and the new bureaucratic administrator (the "manager").⁴

The effect of Chipman's appointment on the Western Department would be dramatic. After Smith's sudden resignation, Chipman appointed Factor R.H. Hall, formerly in charge of the Port Simpson District, as "officer-in-charge" of the Western Department. This time there would be no "Assistant Commissioner" title which would even come close to approaching Chipman's rank. As dramatic, Chipman as an administrator was determined to make communication the cornerstone of his management fortress. Employees who understood this fact and assisted with the design and implementation of more modern commercial management were rewarded. Those who resisted did so at their own peril. For Chipman, modern commercial management included modern records-keeping practices. According to these general criteria and personnel changes, by late May of 1892, the commissioner seemed to feel that the department was moving, albeit slowly, in a satisfactory direction.⁵

Chipman was painfully aware that if the Hudson's Bay Company was to survive in the post-1870 competitive environment, it would have to operate as an efficient and modern commercial enterprise. As early as 1887, his predecessor, Chief Commissioner Joseph Wrigley, had attempted to put the company on a better footing with new regulations governing operations. Part of his effort was formalized communications — the use of printed forms for standard transactions, personnel matters, and administrative functions. Certain printed forms such as the servant's contract had been in use since the eighteenth century. The difference with Wrigley's forms was that they were used at the post and district levels as well as by departments. The other change in the record was in the form's format: it was now loose instead of bound. The information required to complete the forms was quite specific, as was the disposition of the form.⁶ The effect in Wrigley's time

3 For a full description of the state of affairs in the Western Department leading up to Smith's dismissal, see HBCA, A.12/FT Misc/295 fos. 4-17, Chipman's 1891 report to the London Secretary on the Western Department. Tension between the company's top Canadian official and the Pacific officers was not a new development in HBC history. Nearly fifty years earlier, when present-day Oregon and Washington were part of the Columbia District, Sir George Simpson, Governor of Rupert's Land, and Dr. John McLaughlin, Chief Factor in charge of the district, regularly exchanged vitriolic observations on each other's characters. The conflict intensified after the murder of McLaughlin's son and the Chief Factor's perception of Simpson's handling of the ensuing inquiry.

4 One of the best examples of the threat posed by Chipman to the fur trade officers was the dissolution of the Deedpoll in 1892. This agreement between the company and its Chief Factors, Factors, Chief Traders, and Traders had its roots in the amalgamation of the HBC and North West Company in 1821. The aforementioned officers were given a share of the company's profits in accordance with their rank. The Deedpoll was initiated in 1821 and revised in 1834 and 1870. After 1892 the officers were on a salary and bonus system of remuneration.

5 HBCA, A.12/FT Misc/295 fos. 18-34. Letters C.C. Chipman to William Armit, Victoria, 4 November 1891, and Winnipeg, 27 January, 27 May 1892.

6 HBCA, B.332/z/1. Prince Albert Miscellaneous Records, forms memoranda book.

was to place more and better information at the disposal of the departmental offices in a much shorter period of time than had otherwise been the case. For Chipman it meant that the posts and districts were the source of the information which he required, and he determined to bring them closer under his centralized control. In the 1891-92 fiscal year, the geographic departments were done away with in favour of a departmental system based on function. There were now to be three departments — Land, Fur Trade, and Saleshop — which all reported directly to Chipman. This meant changes for the various trading establishments. Those involved in retail sales were removed from district control and brought under the Saleshop Department while the old fur trade districts were directly under the commissioner's watchful eye. Individual posts reported to districts and districts reported to Chipman.⁷

The initial phase of Chipman's reorganization did not radically affect British Columbia. Still known as the Western Department, the Victoria-based office continued to be the authority to which the four British Columbia and one Yukon fur trade districts reported. The saleshops at Vernon, Langley, Kamloops, Nelson, Vancouver, and Victoria were, however, under Chipman's control. The real changes for the company's Pacific operations came in the second part of Chipman's reorganization. In the 1898-99 fiscal year, Chipman again sought to improve company operations across the country. The process continued beyond that particular year through to late 1900. Early 1899 saw the reorganization of the Western Department. The Yukon and Cassiar Districts were amalgamated, and the department became a super-district: the four remaining districts all reported to the Commissioner through Victoria. The merger of the former Port Simpson, Cariboo, New Caledonia, and Cassiar Districts was not out of line with events occurring with other company concerns. In May 1899 the Athabasca, Peace River, and Edmonton Districts were amalgamated under the name Athabasca, and the Cumberland and English River Districts were merged under the name of the former in July.⁸

Chipman's work in British Columbia was not limited to simple amalgamation of districts. There, like every other area of company activity in which he chose to take an interest, Chipman had ideas for virtually every aspect of operations. He began to make his thoughts known to Factor Hall in 1897 with the beginnings of the Yukon Gold Rush. Hall had succeeded in obtaining the contract for transporting and supplying the Yukon Field Force via the company's steamers and interior posts. Chipman thought that, since from all appearances a new and very important trade was opening up in the North, the B.C. District office should be removed to Port Simpson. Hall patiently pointed out that had he not been at Victoria in the midst of the competition, he would not have gained the contract. Chipman gave in on the location of the office, but one area in which he would not compromise was a new system for records keeping in the Western Department office. Offering Hall his own office's system as a pattern, Chipman instructed the factor to make use of many new technological developments in the creation of a correspondence system. He advised Hall to use a letter register and mechanical numbering machine to mark each piece of correspondence. It was obvious that correspondence between the commissioner and officer-in-charge of the Western Department should be typed. The department office

7 For a full description of the 1891-92 reorganization, see Chipman's correspondence with the London Secretary, found in HBCA, A.12 and D.14.

8 HBCA, B.226/b/53.8/R. B.C. District Manager's correspondence, file 8/R.

at Victoria had a Hammond typewriter for this purpose. It would later be used for all correspondence. Letters could be stored vertically in file holders, most of which came with indexes. Finally, and most importantly, Chipman sent Hall one of the employees from his office already familiar with filing systems and equipment, H.A. Tremayne.⁹

Tremayne began his new position under some strain. The relationship between Hall and Chipman was beginning to deteriorate, and Hall undoubtedly resented the young man's intrusion into his domain. Tremayne was also somewhat unpopular with the Western Department staff, for he came to Victoria as Hall's assistant and acted for the factor in his absence. In doing so he outranked the Western Department Accountant and other staff who had been attached to the department office for several years. On one occasion when Hall was absent from Victoria on an inspection tour of the posts in the northern interior region of the province, Tremayne's authority was challenged. He successfully defended his prerogatives, and undoubtedly would have advanced in the company's service had he not chosen to sign on as a purser on one of the company's steamers engaged in coastal transportation. Hall had placed a great deal of trust in Tremayne, and felt betrayed when, upon his return from the inspection tour, he found his assistant gone. Tremayne later claimed that he took the position only because it would not have otherwise been filled, and that such a vacancy would have affected the operation of the steamer.¹⁰

The Western Department correspondence system was less than one year in operation and its architect was gone. Hall complained bitterly that the registration, answering, and filing of letters had become the most time-consuming task in the department office. Chipman was not moved by the Western Department situation. While he would not send anyone from Winnipeg to replace Tremayne, he did direct James Thomson, manager of the Victoria Salesshop, to transfer one of his staff in order to assist Hall until the backlog of filing and outstanding correspondence had been cleared up.¹¹ Although off to a shaky start, modern records-keeping practice at the Western Department office began to take shape. When Hall was transferred to Winnipeg, and later Prince Albert in 1901, James Thomson took over the management of the British Columbia District. Thomson seems to have been better suited to the job, at least according to Chipman's tastes. Thomson had worked his way up through the Salesshop Department, holding the position of manager of the Portage la Prairie, Calgary, Vancouver, and Victoria Salesshops. He better represented the kind of officer sought by Chipman — one schooled in modern business rather than in the fur trade.¹² As such, he was better at keeping modern records than his predecessor. Thomson remained in the position of B.C. District Manager until his promotion to HBC Land Commissioner in 1911. The Governor and Committee in London saw him as able enough to eventually succeed Chipman. Thomson certainly left his mark on the records under his care.

The content of the British Columbia District Manager's correspondence alone makes it interesting; the fact that it was kept in a systematic fashion makes it fascinating. The filing designations were simple enough to make access quick, but complex enough to

9 HBCA, B.226/b/53.8/0. B.C. District Manager's correspondence file 8/0. Correspondence on subject "Office Arrangements," 1898-99.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 For a summary of Thomson's career, see *The Beaver* 264 (June 1933), pp. 79-80.

differentiate between subjects. The vast majority of correspondence is from the Hall and Thomson periods, although a few letters to and from Thomson's successor, C.H. French, have survived. At least twenty main file groups are known to have been used, with the subjects reflecting the administration of a large district. The records system shows the need for constant communication on a wide variety of topics associated with the operation of a successful commercial enterprise. It underscores as well the relationship of this communication with an effective transportation network. The main file groups were as follows:

1. Port Simpson District
 2. Cariboo District (Quesnel)
 3. New Caledonia District (Stuart's Lake/Fort St. James)
 4. Cassiar District (Glenora)
 5. Fragmentary
 6. Fragmentary
 7. Credit
 8. Administration
 9. Furs
 10. Mining Syndicates
 11. Federal Government Accounts
 - 12.-14. Unknown
 15. Steamer *Monte Cristo*
 16. Grand Trunk Pacific Accounts
 17. B.C. Transport Service — Steamer *Hazelton*
 18. B.C. Transport Service — Steamer *Port Simpson*
 19. Hunting Parties
 05. Steamers
- No records are known to have survived from Groups 12-17.

In marking file designations, a two-part alpha-numerical system was used. The number of the file group was followed by an alphabetical designation, which usually reflected the first letter of the subject. Thus, for example, file 1/A was the location for Port Simpson District accounts.

The first four file groups contain correspondence on the subdistricts of the larger British Columbia District, which were themselves districts prior to the 1899 reorganization. There were about twenty subgroups in each file group. Certain alphabetical designations were common to all four groups. They were as follows:

- A. Accounts: references to monthly and annual accounts, business at posts, annual reports on districts, confidential reports on clerks, accounts with Vancouver saleshop, accounts for collection, outstanding balances, cash advances, marine insurance, and many other accounts-related subjects.
- C. Commodities: regarding overstock of goods and goods returned.
- D. Drafts: concerning drafts issued at district posts, their collection, and Advice List Bills Payable (Form 21).

- E. Remittances: referred to customers' cheques, gold dust, government vouchers, and other payments.
- F. Furs: correspondence referring to district posts' valuation of returns, shipments, and furs purchased and traded.
- G. Customer Accounts: payments, credit, and orders from various customers, including schools, missions, and hospitals.
- I. Invoices: for goods and errors in same.
- M. Mail: tenders for contracts and contracts received, mail routes, company's responsibilities under various contracts, inquiries on arrival and departure of mail.
- P. Packtrains: referred to purchase of pack animals (horses and mules), engagement of packers, packers' accounts, and transportation of goods.
- R. Requisitions: correspondence between Victoria and district posts, Vancouver saleshop, manufacturers and suppliers, including memoranda from the Commissioner and other Winnipeg departments on requisitions and orders.
- S. Staff: references to staff contracts, conduct, abilities, applications for wage increases and transfers, and private staff matters.
- U. Miscellaneous: material on a wide range of district affairs, including some complementary to file on invoices, requisitions, and other files unique to individual districts.
- W. Trade and Liquor Licences: granting and renewal of district posts' licences.

Other subjects which were not common to all district groups included buildings, steamer claims, land, interior freighting, aid to sick and destitute Indians, taxes, transportation, clerks' trips, and some district posts and subposts.

File group 5 and 6 ("Fragmentary") are the least complete of the surviving groups, with no apparent common subject. The seventh group concerns credit, and correspondence was filed by the last name of the person credited. File group 8 ("Administration") contains administrative correspondence, and is by far the most interesting. Enough information was found in this group to reconstruct the entire system. Letters are to and from district posts, the commissioner in Winnipeg, and the Vancouver saleshop. Filing was alphabetical, but not always consistent. The subject "Company Records," for example, can be found under both 8/C and 8/R.

In spite of its inconsistencies, file group 8 is a good source of information. To take an example, the Yukon Gold Rush, being the trade from which Hall and Chipman expected so much, is very well documented in a number of subgroups. File 8/K contains good information on policy with regard to the "special stock" of Klondike goods; 8/M has correspondence regarding miners' whereabouts, their mail, and individual miners; and 8/Y is devoted to the "Yukon Trade" at Atlin Lake.

The fact that a whole file group was devoted to furs demonstrates that although the company had started to develop its retail operations, the fur trade in British Columbia

continued to be a major concern. File group 9 contains correspondence on furs purchased or offered to the company for sale, which was filed alphabetically by last name of the vendor. The exception is file 9/Z, where letters concern the administration of fur sales, with such information as valuations of returns, London sales results, Victoria shipments, and purchasing directions.

Visions of Gold Rush profits surfaced when the company agreed to supply and ship freight for a number of mining concerns. The venture was less than successful. File group 10 ("Mining Syndicates") refers to agreements with four such companies. Initially concerned with the terms for carrying on business, the content of the correspondence shifts to reflect the growing concern of collecting on accounts. This group and file group 11 ("Federal Government Accounts") are the only two which used another number as the second component in their filing designations. Correspondence concerning the St. Anthony's Exploration Company, for example, will be found under file 10/1. The only file surviving in file group 11 deals with an account with the Department of Indian Affairs. (The general subject title was constructed from letter register entries.)

It is very interesting to note that five file groups, or one quarter of the entire correspondence system, involve steamers. With the exception of "Fragmentary" file group 5, which has the earliest references to steamers in the correspondence and is likely one of Hall's categories, the steamers were treated individually. They seem to have been given the same status as the district file groups, and in fact shared some of the same alphabetical designations. In file group 18, the files for the *S.S. Port Simpson*, block 18/A was used for accounts, 18/D for drafts, and 18/E for remittances. The fact that the steamers accounted for so many of the file groups indicated the pivotal role which they played in the British Columbia District. Not only a business unto themselves in terms of passenger services, they were also the main supply vessels, taking in goods and bringing out furs. They were an important component of the company's mail service, and thus played an important role in communications not only for the company but for the whole province.

File group 19 ("Hunting Parties") shows the benefit of an established transportation network. By using a combination of steamer, lake boats, and packtrains, the company was able to offer well-organized hunting trips. The idea appears to have appealed to several members of the European aristocracy, who found the interior of British Columbia to be an interesting game reserve.

Consideration of the correspondence in total, both for its system and content, shows a dynamic interplay of forces in the workings of a district on the verge of entering the twentieth century. The two men responsible for the British Columbia district during the period for most of the surviving correspondence epitomize the tension between retail sales and the fur trade in company operations. The newer steamers were only part of the transportation network in British Columbia; packtrains and lake boats freighted supplies and made communication in the interior possible, and they also provided the link with other company districts, such as Athabasca or Peace River. The dynamic of old and new is reflected in the content and, more significantly, in the organization of the company's records.

The correspondence of the company's British Columbia District Manager is valuable as a rare example of a post-1870 departmental records-keeping system. It is possible, through the study of such records systems, to advance the understanding of the Hudson's

Bay Company both in terms of traditional fur trade historiography and of an evolving corporate entity and management ethos in the post-1870 period. The recovery of such a records system from obscurity serves not only the archivist, but points directly to the importance of *l'ordre primitif*, namely, that the order and internal organization of the record itself gives important information, quite aside from subject content. Historian, geographer, and communications specialist alike can see from the records system the role which transportation and communication played in the company's British Columbia operations, and the importance which the company itself assigned to monitoring and controlling that role.