

Peter Pond: Map Maker of the Northwest (1740-1807)

... there can be no doubt that Peter Pond deserves a place among the stalwart Canadians who did so much to inject new vitality into the fur trade of the Northwest. As explorer he was the first to cross the Methye Portage into the Mackenzie River basin, and he laid the foundations for the later voyages down the Mackenzie and up the Peace rivers. As trader he was largely responsible for the building up of an efficient organization in the Athabasca departments, the exploitation of which was to be indispensable to the development of the Northwest Company. Canada is deeply indebted to Peter Pond. [Gates, 1965:16.]

Stimulus for the exploration of the Canadian Northwest coincided with the depletion of choice beaver pelts in eastern Canada. As a result, a refocussing of trading activities occurred in order to directly tap into the prime beaver of the Mackenzie and Athabasca regions. The character of the westward expansion of the fur trade in Canada is epitomized by the rivalries between the principal trading concerns, the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company. In this setting, Peter Pond, early fur trader and explorer, was a key factor in opening up the region known as Athabasca Country.

What is known of Pond's life and exploits is derived from his maps and his memoirs written, at over sixty years of age, upon his return to Connecticut. Pond's journal on the Canadian Northwest remained in the possession of his family. Obviously not realizing the historical value of the journal, pages were torn out to light kitchen fires, until what remained was rescued by Mrs. Nathan Gillet Pond. The preserved portion is Pond's own account of his days as a fur trader in Minnesota prior to 1775. Pond was born in Milford, Connecticut, on 18 January 1740 and died in 1807. He was apparently trained as a shoemaker. After serving in the capacity of a provincial trooper in four separate army enlistments, he attempted a career at sea, but returned home upon the death of his mother to care for his family. His trading ventures commenced about 1765 in the Detroit area, probably in the company of his brothers. Prior to his career as fur trader and explorer in the Canadian Northwest, he traded along the upper Mississippi before crossing north of the Great Lakes to mingle with the *coureur de bois* and independents who pushed increasingly northward and westward.

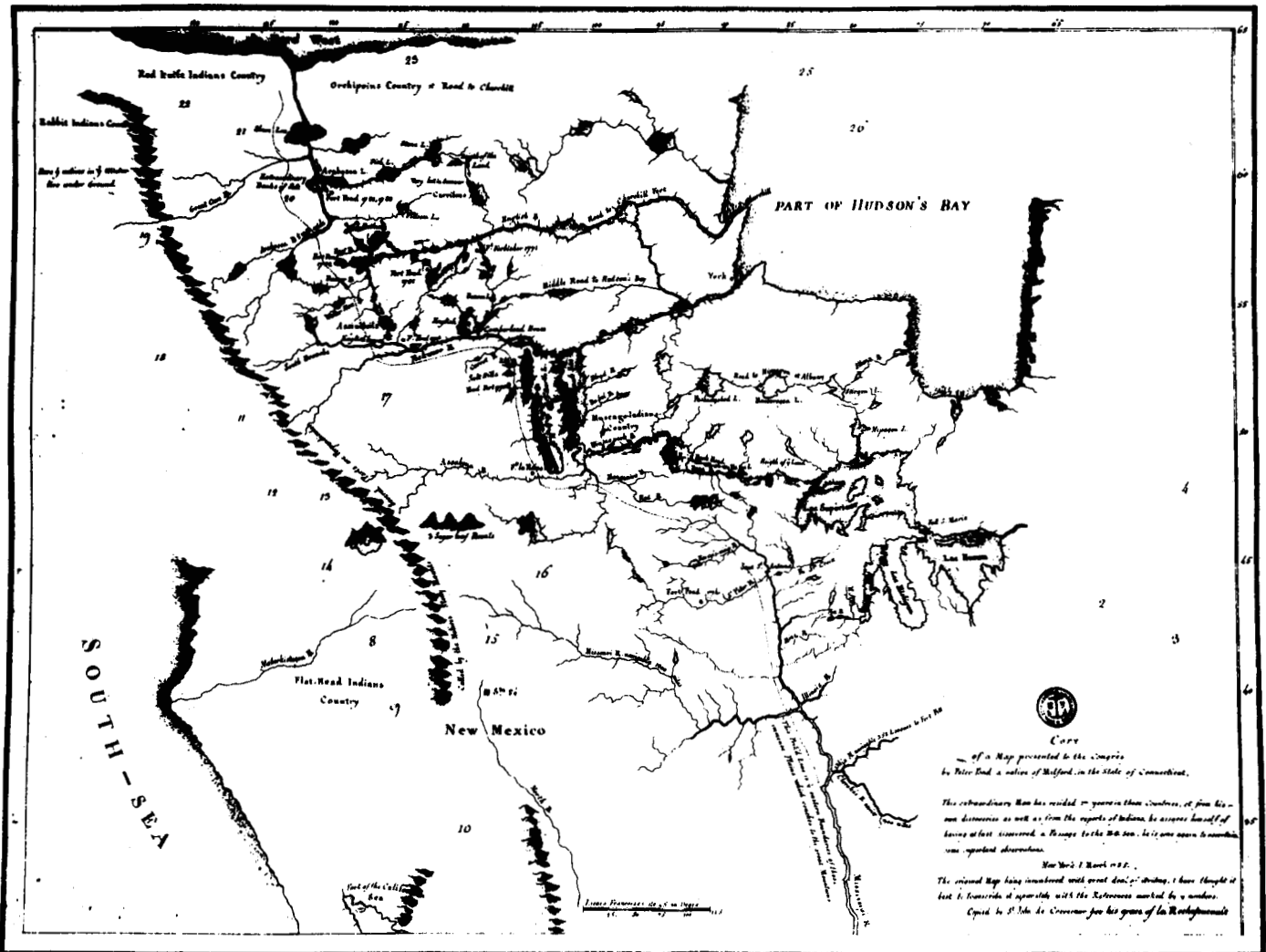
Without the aid of a manuscript journal, Pond's movements in the Northwest have been reconstructed from his maps and from the accounts and letters left by his contemporaries. Pond's earliest appearance in the Northwest occurred in 1775, when he, with a group of Canadian traders including the Frobisher brothers, Alexander Henry (the Elder), and Jean Baptiste Cadotte, met at Sturgeon Lake on the Saskatchewan. Pond wintered two years on the Saskatchewan before making the decision to penetrate Athabasca Country on behalf of a group of traders on the Saskatchewan River in 1778. With four loaded canoes, he ascended the Churchill to Isle a la Crosse, the most northwesterly point frequented by traders at that time. From that point on, he travelled essentially uncharted lands and water courses, known only through Indian accounts.

In the fall of 1778, Peter Pond built what became known as the Old Establishment on the Athabasca River approximately one-half mile downstream from the confluence with the Embarras River. By establishing himself in Athabasca Country and trading directly with the native inhabitants, he effectively curbed the flow of fine furs to the Hudson's Bay Company. Pond wintered at the post. His reward was great. The Chipewyans of the area brought him thousands of the finest, darkest, silkiest beaver skins he had ever seen. Perhaps even more significantly, they introduced him to the merits of pemmican, a mixture of dried buffalo meat and fat that was lightweight and stored well. To ease and facilitate fur trade exploration and travel, Pond set up a series of caches of pemmican along the Athabasca route, successfully negating the necessity of daily hunting and expediting rapid travel to and from the North. With his promotion of the use of pemmican, the advantages of using it for brigade provisioning became apparent, resulting in the "pemmican trade," which later characterized the fur trade. Without Pond's "discovery" of pemmican and the institution of pemmican caches, the life support system of the brigades and the character of westward exploration would have been entirely different.



The author's impression of Peter Pond.

Among Pond's men were French voyageurs with the surnames of Cardinal, Louison, and Le Tandre (Hudson's Bay Company Archives F.2/1), which are common in the Lesser Slave Lake - Grande Prairie area today. The occurrence of these names indicates that not only did these men initiate exploration of the Peace River but they remained in the area and contributed to the ethnic makeup of the local population. This is corroborated by Mackenzie's journals of his voyage to the Pacific Ocean in 1793. He had wintered (1792-93) at Fort of the Forks, six miles up the Peace from the mouth of the Smoky River. A Baptiste Bisson was one of the voyageurs to commence the journey with Mackenzie. Mair (1908) records, during his visit to Lesser Slave Lake with the treaty commission in 1899, his acquaintance with Catherine Bisson, daughter



Copy of a map by Peter Pond presented to the Congress 1 March 1785. Courtesy: Glenbow Museum Archives.

ter of Baptiste Bisson, who was born on 1 January 1793 at Lesser Slave Lake. There can be no doubt that Bisson had visited Lesser Slave Lake, probably by crossing overland via the war road from Peace River in pursuit of furs and thus met and mingled with the local population.

Pond left the Old Establishment for Montreal in the spring of 1779, leaving Etienne Waden in charge of Athabasca. He returned to spend part of the winter of 1781-82 with Waden at La Ronge. Each of the men had been chosen to represent the interests of the independent alliances in the interior. Probably as a result of the opposing personalities of Pond and Waden and the confined winter quarters at La Ronge, conflict between the two men reached explosive levels. In March of that year, Waden was shot and killed. Pond was tried for the crime but acquitted (Innis, 1930).

Sometime during the 1781-82 season, Pond returned to his Athabasca post to collect the furs he had cached there and departed in spring for Grand Portage with his packs. After wintering at Isle a la Crosse the following year, Pond returned to Athabasca Country. In the next four years he was to explore Lake Athabasca and Great Slave Lake and to establish a post on Great Slave Lake. It was during this period that Pond collected the baseline data from which he drew the

earliest maps of the Canadian Northwest. Relying partially on Indian accounts and partially on his own explorations and observations, Pond identified and depicted the assumed courses of the Peace, Salt, Hay, Taltson, Lac La Martre, Anderson, and upper Mackenzie rivers, as well as what are no doubt the Virginia Falls on the Nahanni River. His map depictions correctly identify the existence of Great Slave Lake, Lac La Martre, and Great Bear Lake.

After a brief visit to Montreal and the United States, Pond returned to the Athabasca district in the spring of 1786. During his absence, John Ross, a partner of Gregory McLeod & Company, had arrived in Athabasca Country to compete directly with Pond, representing the Northwest Company. Pond found Ross's impudence intolerable, and in culmination of a dispute between Pond's and Ross's men, John Ross was killed early in 1787. Fidler (Hudson's Bay Company Archives E.3/1) indicates that Peche, one of Pond's men, shot Ross under order from Pond. Pond was again tried and acquitted of murder.

Alexander Mackenzie was sent to Athabasca to replace Pond. He wintered with Pond at Pond's Old Establishment in 1787-88. There is no doubt that Mackenzie obtained all of his geographical information on the surrounding country from

Peter Pond. It is likely that during the long winter nights beside the stone fireplace, it was not only Pond's knowledge of the country, but also his enthusiasm for the potential of reaching the western sea that proved to be the catalyst for Mackenzie's voyages down what was to become the Mackenzie River and up the Peace River. As Pond, no doubt, wished to devote the next few years entirely to exploration, he left for Montreal and Quebec on 15 May 1788 to seek financial aid for continued explorations. It was there that he heard of the successful completion of Mackenzie's voyage to the Arctic Ocean. However, Mackenzie, upon reporting on his attainment of the mouth of the river, discredited Pond's theories concerning the Northwest Passage, as well as Pond's contributions. Probably as a result of his disappointment with Mackenzie's results and his dissatisfaction with the Northwest Company, Pond sold his shares in the Northwest Company. In 1790 or 1791 he returned to the United States, never to return to the Canadian Northwest. He spent his last years reading Lahontan, Carver, and other writings on the Northwest and writing his memoirs.

In addition to his contributions in charting the Northwest, Pond compiled vast amounts of data on the geography of the Great Lakes area through his travels in the upper Mississippi and Detroit areas. He was responsible for providing information on the geography of the Great Lakes area to Benjamin Franklin that dictated the character of the Canadian-American boundary negotiations in 1782-83.

Pond's character has been described as volatile, occasionally explosive, morose, suspicious, unsociable, proud, sensitive, sometimes impetuous, and intractable. Others have described him as a true adventurer, of sterling character, courageous, industrious, aggressive, and extremely competent. Although his memoirs suggest that he was largely unschooled, he apparently received a good "common education" and was literate in both English and French. His wit and good humour and his artistic sense show through in his writings. His own writings and detailed cartographic notations indicate a man with a high regard for knowledge, a keen sense of observation, and a desire to preserve information. Whatever may be said of his character and literary abilities,

there is no doubt that here was a man extremely capable of assembling, integrating, and interpreting vast amounts of verbal and visual geographical data and presenting them in amazingly accurate depictions of geography for which there was no precedent.

As a result of his travels in the Athabasca area and contact with the resident Indians, Peter Pond compiled information on the geography of the region and prepared the first map of the north-central parts of Canada. Pond's cartographic assembly was aimed at the discovery of a route to the western sea. His knowledge of the Northwest, his vision of a passage to the Pacific Ocean, and his own desire to reach that ocean served as an inspiration for the epochal voyages of Alexander Mackenzie. Despite his unequivocal importance as a historical figure, Peter Pond has not been recognized for his accomplishments. He is a controversial historical figure, largely because of the lack of documentation of his movements other than his maps and the accusations of the murders of Jean Etienne Waden and John Ross. However, there can be no doubt that Peter Pond is a legend in Canadian history, standing in the ranks of Hearne, Thompson, and Mackenzie.

FURTHER READINGS

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