

James Sinclair. (1811-1856)

James Sinclair was the Metis son of Chief Factor William Sinclair and his Cree-Metis wife Nahoway (Margaret) Norton. James was educated at Stromness in the Orkneys and then took Law at the University of Edinburgh (1819-1826).

On December 3, 1829, James married Elizabeth Bird, the daughter of retired Chief Factor James Bird. They were to have nine children before her death in 1846. Subsequently, in April of 1848, Sinclair married again to Marty Campbell, the daughter of Chief Trader Colin Campbell. They had three daughters and one son. His son was born shortly after Sinclair was killed at age 45 in 1856.

Sinclair started working for the HBC as a twenty-one year old apprentice in 1826. On July, 6, 1827 Sinclair left Fort Albany for the Red River settlement where he established himself as a private trader. He started with a small bequest from his father, who had died in 1818, but by 1849 Sinclair had increased the value of his property to £4,500, including a river lot, house, stables, livestock, carts, and boats. Later he went into the fur trading and freighting business with Andrew McDermot and they had a contract to conduct brigades from Red River up to York Factory. During the 1830s and 1840s the partners freighted goods for the HBC and for private shippers, and were engaged in the plains provision trade, the fur trade, and the retail trade, as well as other activities, such as selling wood products, cattle, and hay, and furnishing accommodation for visitors to the settlement. In 1845 HBC governor Sir George Simpson wrote of the partners' "superior standing and comparative intelligence."

The HBC became suspicious of them and feared that they would outfit Metis to trade in competition with the company and promote trade with Norman Kittson's American Fur Company at Pembina. Consequently, they suspended Sinclair's contract.

In 1841, at age 35, Sinclair was hired by Governor Simpson to lead an emigration party to the Columbia River area where they were to be settled on the Cowlitz River. HBC Governor George Simpson promoted this migration in the hope that it would help to maintain the land north of the Columbia River as HBC and British territory. The 1700-mile trip took them from White Horse Plains to Fort Vancouver and finally Fort Nisqually. Sinclair's brother-in-law, Jemmy Jock Bird acted as their guide for the part of the journey that crossed Blackfoot territory. They crossed the Rockies through White Man Pass to Red Rock Gorge (which is now Sinclair Canyon, B.C.) and on October 12, 1841, after a 130-day journey the group reached Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River.

Upon returning to Red River from this journey, Sinclair established contacts with American fur traders. He imported American goods and became involved with Peter Garrioch and others in establishing the "cart line" from the settlement to St. Paul Minnesota. Although he had rejected a contract to smuggle furs to Norman Kittson at Pembina, the HBC suspected both Sinclair and McDermot of clandestine trade and encouragement of Kittson's activities. In 1844 it terminated their freighting contracts. The HBC's London committee had given Sinclair permission to ship tallow to Great Britain,

but a consignment was left at York Factory. As well, the company introduced measures to check the import of American goods and the illicit export of furs by establishing customs duties. Sinclair, along with the Garrioch group, resisted the collection of customs duties on their imports. He attempted to get compensation for his broken freighting contracts and cancellation of long-standing fur-trading privileges. He joined Garrioch in smuggling to Kittson furs of an estimated value of over \$2,000.

In 1845, Sinclair presented a petition to Alexander Christie, Governor of Assiniboia, asking to clarify Metis hunting, trapping and trading rights in relation to the Hudson's Bay Company and to the Red River Settlement. He wrote,

...having of the present moment a very strong belief that we, as natives of this country, and as Half-Breeds have the right to hunt furs in the Hudson's Bay Company's Territory whenever we think proper, and again sell those furs to the highest bidders, likewise having a doubt that natives of the country can be prevented from trading and trafficking with one another, we would wish to have your opinion on the subject.¹

Governor Christie chose not to respond directly, but rather pointed out that Sinclair had access to the HBC Charter and was familiar with it! Therefore, Sinclair wrote the Governor and Committee of the Company on September 6, 1845 and asked them to clarify this matter. The response of Governor John Henry Pelly and the Committee was to write to Simpson on 14 April 1847, and instruct him to pay Sinclair £100 and to discharge him from the employ of the Company. Sinclair followed up with a petitions to the United States Congress asking to be admitted the rights of American citizens upon settlement in their territory and a second petition, along with Father Georges A. Belcourt, to the Colonial Secretary in London, asking for free trade and representative government. Sinclair then traveled to London and linked up with Alexander Kennedy Isbister, a Metis lawyer, and they published a series of pamphlets in the *London Times* (August 1848) claiming the HBC Charter was void.

Sinclair went to St. Louis, Missouri, in the spring of 1848, after taking his daughters Harriette and Maria to Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. He then travelled to California and allegedly found gold worth £1,300 in a single week. He returned early in the winter of 1848–49 to Red River

In 1849, Pierre Guillaume Sayer was charged with illegal trafficking in furs and Sinclair defended him by presenting Isbister's articles to demonstrate that the Charter was under active challenge. He was successful in having Sayer's sentence stayed and to all intents Metis trade became "free."

Sinclair left Red River to become a citizen of the United States in 1849. Strangely, the HBC then engaged him as a company clerk in charge of Fort Walla Walla in 1853. In 1854, he guided a second group of Red River Settlement emigrants to the Columbia area and he and his family along with the settlers established residence near Fort Walla Walla.

¹ H.B.C.A D.5/15 fo. 139A, Governor's Correspondence, James Sinclair to Alexander Christie, 29 August 1845.

Now (1855) the company had complimentary words with regard to Sinclair, Simpson wrote,

Mr. James Sinclair who is in charge... states that the trade in the district has been seriously injured by the dishonesty and mismanagement of the persons who have been in charge... I anticipate an immediate change for the better under Mr. Sinclair's able management ...²

Shortly thereafter, on March 26, 1856, Sinclair was shot and killed in an Indian attack on the settlement at the Cascades while on Hudson's Bay company business

References

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² H.B.C.A D.4/75, fo. 395, Governor Simpson's Correspondence Book Outward, 1854-1856.