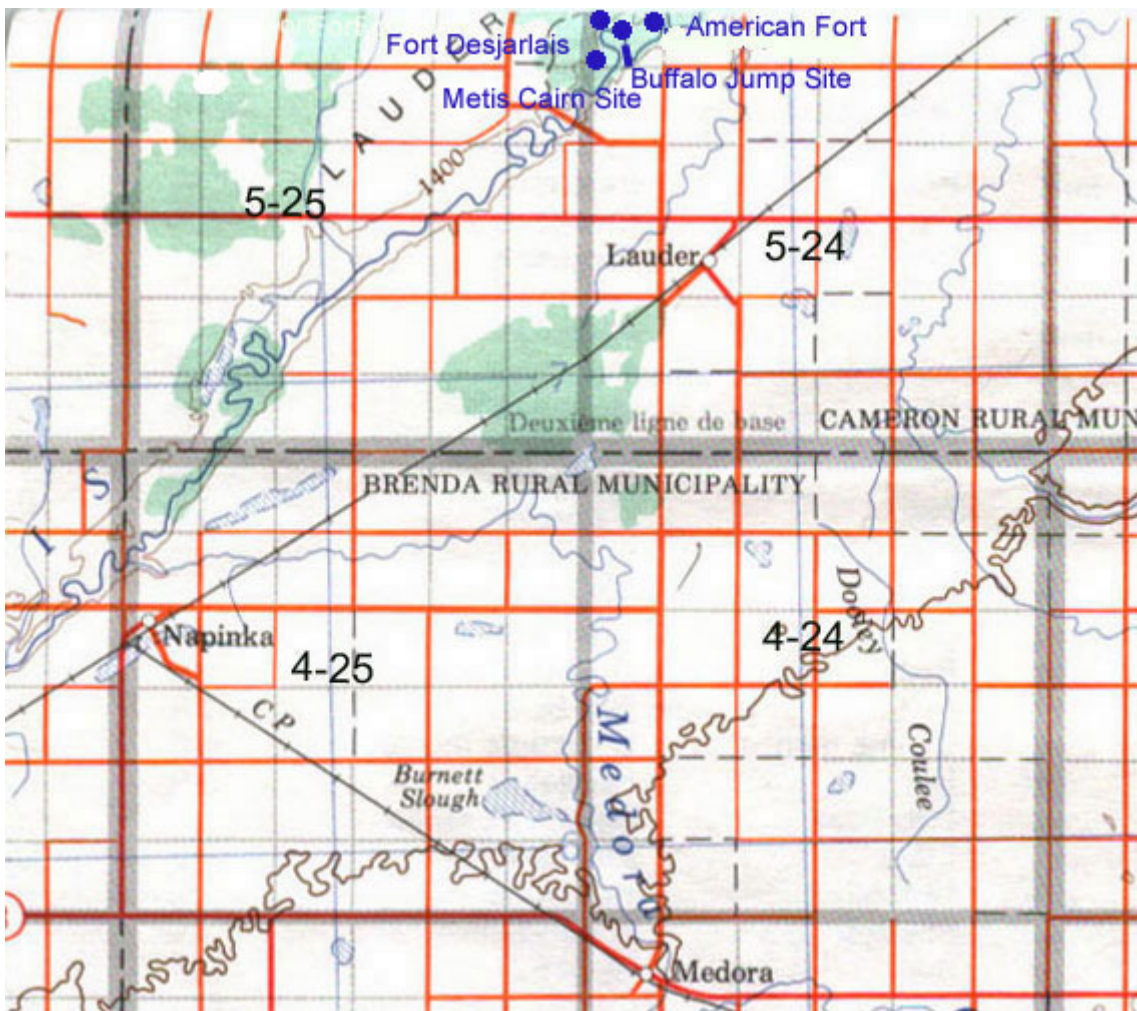


Fort Desjarlais

Fort Desjarlais was built in 1836 by Joseph Desjarlais. Joseph “Mitche Cote” Desjarlais was born in 1806 in Lac la Biche. Joseph had met and married LaLouise Josephte Richard in 1834 in Baie St. Paul. She had been the daughter of Joseph Richard and her mother had been named Isabelle (Chippewa). Joseph had started the fur-trading store on the Souris River in 1836, providing the much sought after Pemmican for many travellers. He had also stocked his trading post with whiskey. The Indians had known Joseph by the name of “Misigade”. It had been Joseph (1806) that had built Fort Desjarlais, when he had enclosed his trading store within an Oak Palisade on the Souris River near present day Lauder. Joseph had enclosed his fur trading store because of the many attacks by the aggressive Sioux.

Fort Desjarlais was located on the Souris River to the north-west of present day Lauder, Manitoba (Section 31, Township 5, Range 24). It was located about five miles from Fort Mr. Grant.



Joseph was the son of Jean Baptiste Desjarlais¹ born 1787 at St. Paul des Saulteaux (Saulteaux Village) and Lizette Charlotte Cardinal and was the grandson of Joseph Desjarlais Sr. from Contrecoeur, Quebec (b. 1764)² and his Chippewa/Metis wife Okimaskwew. They married in 1785 in Manitoba. The Desjarlais family established one post on the Souris River, near Lauder, and another small post on the Souris near present-day Minot, North Dakota. The northern post was operated by Joseph and Antoine (b. 1793)³ with their brother Marcel (b. 1803)⁴, brother Baptiste⁵ and sons-in-law Charles DeMontigny, Eusebe Ledoux and Simon Blondeau. The elder Joseph may have been a fur trader; licences for 1783 included one for a Joseph “Desjerlais.”

Chippewa names have survived for two of the Desjarlais sons. Marcel was called “Quewezas” and Joseph ‘Mitche Cote,” or “Hairy Legs.” Antoine Desjarlais, the middle son, entered the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company. He operated a post in the Turtle Mountains as an interpreter from 1848 to 1855.

Joseph Desjarlais Jr. chose a site in the Lauder sand hills for his trading post. The site was about thirty feet above the level of the Souris, which ran past the south wall. Within the stockade—perhaps as large as one hundred fifty feet square—there stood one long log building and several smaller ones.

Fort Desjarlais, as it came to be known, was serviced more by Red River carts than by canoes. The Yellow Quill Trail, running from a point twenty miles from Fort Garry up the Assiniboine and Souris Rivers, served both Forth Cuthbert Grant and Fort Desjarlais before splitting into independent branches serving North Dakota and the Turtle Mountains. In addition to this, there was the Hudson’s Bay Trail that ran north through the sand hills from Fort Desjarlais.

Peter Garrioch, who operated a post on the Souris River south of the American border briefly in the 1840s, passed through Fort Cuthbert Grant in January 1846. He recorded in his journal that “Mr. Grant had seized the goods and furs of several of the traders.” One that he called “Quewezas”—the Indian name for Marcel Desjarlais, Joseph’s brother—was foremost on the list. Since Garrioch did not mention him, it is likely that Joseph was not in the post at the time. Garrioch also noted that the magistrates had “the good sense to refuse to have anything to do with this business.”

¹ Baptiste 'Nishecabo' Desjarlais was born ca 1787. Baptiste 'Nishecabo' died in Little Fork, Qu'Appelle Lakes, NWT, in winter 1871; he was 84. In 1815 when Baptiste 'Nishecabo' was 28, he first married Charlotte "Lizette" Cardinal, in Baie St. Paul, Red River Settlement.

² Joseph died in Swan River, Manitoba, on 22 Oct 1833; he was 79. Joseph also had a son called Joseph (b. 1791). On 4 Nov 1844 Joseph married Josephite Cardinal, the daughter of Joseph "Matchi-Pa-Koos" Cardinal and Louise "Maskekostoesk" Frobisher, in Lac La Biche.

³ Antoine died in Mar 1870. Antoine first married Suzanne "Catherine" Allary born ca 1787. Suzanne "Catherine" died in Lebret, Saskatchewan, on 17 Jan 1878; she was 91. Jean-Baptiste Desjarlais, Antoine’s son, who was with his Uncle Joseph at the post, married Cuthbert Grant’s daughter Julie.

⁴ Marcel "Gwiwisens" married Brigitte Cardinal.

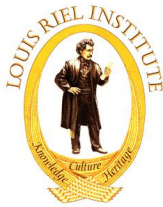
⁵ Baptiste 'Nishecabo' Desjarlais was born ca 1787 in Lac La Biche, NWT. Baptiste 'Nishecabo' died in Little Fork, Qu'Appelle Lakes, NWT, in winter 1871; he was 84. In 1815 when Baptiste 'Nishecabo' was 28, he first married Charlotte "Lizette" Cardinal, in Baie St. Paul, Red River Settlement.

It is possible that Grant's 1846 action against Fort Desjarlais was in response to Governor Christie's 1844 crackdown on independent traders. Christie had forbidden the import of goods in Company ships by settlers who would not sign a declaration that they did not deal in furs; and, in addition, ordered that the sender's name be printed on each envelope sent so that the mail of anyone suspected of illicit trading could be seized.

Antoine's son-in-law, Charles Demontigny, was also at the fort. One would assume from Garrioch's comment that the third Desjarlais brother, Marcel, was also there periodically. Father Picton, in his papers in the St. Boniface Historical Society, notes that Antoine and Marcel were in the Turtle Mountains in the 1850s. Either Demontigny or Marcel could have controlled the operation when Joseph was absent.

References:

Bruce Wishart, "Fort Desjarlais", 2010, first published in the *Souris Valley Echo*, June 29, 1987 and July 6, 1987.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute