

Simon Fraser, the explorer



Simon Fraser was born May 20, 1776, in the small rural hamlet of Mapletown in Hoosick Township, New York, near Bennington, Vermont. His father, Simon Fraser, senior, and his mother Isabella Grant, had emigrated from Scotland in 1773. Simon senior was a Loyalist, whose sympathies led him to join General Burgoyne's forces. Taken prisoner by the American troops at the Battle of Bennington, he eventually died in early 1779 because of harsh treatment received in Albany Jail.

Even after the peace of 1783, Fraser's family was harassed by their American neighbours. Consequently in 1784, Isabel Fraser sold the farm in Mapleton, and, like thousands of other Loyalists, fled to Canada with her young family; Simon was only eight years old. At first the family lived with Isabel's eldest son, William, at Coteau du Lac. Later, she moved the family to St. Andrews West, near Cornwall, Upper Canada where her second son, Angus, was already farming the family property. About 1790, Simon was sent to stay with his uncle, John Fraser, a prominent judge of Common Court Pleas in Montreal.

Under his uncle's care, Simon attended school for two years before joining two of his cousins, Peter and Donald Grant, in the fur trade. In 1792, he became an apprentice clerk in the North West Company of Montreal and was sent to learn his trade in Athabasca in 1793. He became a partner in 1801.

As a partner, Fraser was selected to oversee the extension of the company's activities to the

land west of the Rocky Mountains from 1805-1808. His mandate from the North West Company was to cross the Rockies and establish trading relations with the Indians in the interior of what is now British Columbia, but which Fraser called New Caledonia. Here he established Fort McLeod in 1805, Fort St. James and Fort Fraser in 1806, and Fort George in 1807.

In the meantime, discovering a trade route to the Pacific had become a priority for the North West Company. Its officials gave Fraser the task of exploring a river believed to be the Columbia to its ocean outlet. It is ironic that this river which he so successfully navigated turned out not to be the Columbia, but rather an unknown river which fellow Nor'wester David Thompson would later name the Fraser River. It is to this voyage that Simon Fraser owes his fame.

On May 28, 1808, Fraser and a company of 23 men set out from Fort George to follow the river to the Pacific. Their harrowing journey, 520 miles in length and 36 days long, revealed both the ruggedness of the British Columbia interior and the courage of those who traversed it. Their expedition culminated in Fraser's discovery of the mouth of the river at Musqueam.

Following his exploration of the "Fraser" river, Simon Fraser returned to the Athabaska department of the North West Company. In 1816, although endeavouring to retire from his life in the fur trade, Fraser found himself embroiled in a conflict between the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company over Lord Selkirk's Red River settlement, which ended in the Seven Oaks Massacre. As a partner in the North West Company, Fraser was one of several men charged in the affair. However, when the case was tried in 1818, he and the others were acquitted of all charges.

The trial coincided with the end of Fraser's career in the North West Company. In 1818, he moved to St. Andrews West where his brother, Angus, and his sisters already resided. Eventually acquiring 500 acres in Cornwall Township, Simon Fraser built a sawmill and a gristmill. Unfortunately, both mills proved unprofitable.

His final years in St. Andrews West were, however, not entirely without reward. On June 7, 1820, Simon Fraser married Catherine MacDonell (of the Scottish Leek family) with whom he had nine children including a daughter who died in infancy. In 1838 Fraser, at the advanced age of 62, took up arms in defense of Canada during the Rebellion. In the dark he fell down a flight of steps and seriously injured his right knee. Now permanently disabled, he was forced to apply to the government for a small pension, which he eventually received in 1841.

Simon Fraser died aged 86 on August 18, 1862. Happily united in life for over 42 years, the couple were not long separated by death. His wife died the next day. Simon and Catherine Fraser were buried in a single grave, which exists to this day in the Roman Catholic cemetery at St. Andrews West.

Written by James Saunders and
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28 December 1995.

For further information see:

1. W. Kaye Lamb, *The Letters and Journals of Simon Fraser, 1806-1808*. Toronto, The MacMillan Company of Canada Limited, 1960.
2. An extensive history of Simon Fraser, the explorer, in a series of articles: Barbara Rogers, Simon Fraser, explorer: the early years, *British Columbia Genealogist*, Vol. 18 No. 2 (June 1989) p. 18-23.
 - Barbara Rogers, Simon Fraser's early years in the fur trade, *British Columbia Genealogist*, Vol. 18 No. 3 (September 1989) p. 36-44.
 - Barbara Rogers, Second leg of Simon Fraser's first journey: apprenticeship years on the Peace River, *British Columbia Genealogist*, Vol. 18 No. 4 (December 1989) p. 58-63 [continued in next issue].
 - Barbara Rogers, Simon Fraser's years on the Peace River, *British Columbia Genealogist*, Vol. 19 No. 1 (March 1990) p. 2-9.
3. Barbara Rogers, Simon Fraser - explorer, in *Greater Vancouver Book*, Chuck Davis, Editor, Linkman Press, 1997. Contains a two page article about Simon Fraser's stay in the Lower Mainland as related in an oral history from Native Chiefs.

Do your own exploring in the SFU Archives! The Simon Fraser Letters are in our holdings.