

140 MEADE STREET NORTH

WILLIAM ROSS HOUSE

CITY OF WINNIPEG

HISTORICAL BUILDINGS COMMITTEE

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Ross House has been doubly blessed in its significance as an historic site, and its restoration by the Manitoba Historical Society has been a real service to Winnipeg. Ross House is a fine example of a Red River home, built in a representative style, and presently in a good state of preservation. Secondly, the log house is the only remaining physical evidence of the Ross family's prominent position in the growth and development of Red River.

The Ross connection began in 1825 when Alexander Ross moved his new family to the tiny colony along the banks of the Red River. Ross had been born on Morayshire, Scotland in ca.1781 and immigrated, by himself, to Canada in 1804. By 1805, he had settled in Glengarry County to teach school for four years, but thereafter pursued a career in the fur trade. He joined up with John Jacob Astor's Pacific Fur Company in a massive scheme designed to control the fur trade of all North America. To that end, Ross was a partner in the building of Fort Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia River. Astor's ambitions were never realized and the North West Company took over in 1813. Ross, then a trader in the Okanagan area, carried on in the area and in 1818 was promoted to Chief Trader at Fort Nez-Perces at the headwaters of the Columbia.¹

Alexander Ross had married Sarah, the daughter of an Okanagan Indian Chief and had three children by the time he met with Sir George Simpson, the governor of the Hudson's Bay Company which had merged with the North Westers in 1821. Ross admitted at that time that he was disillusioned with the fur traders life, but more importantly he was concerned with "the necessity of returning to a place where I could have the means of giving my children a Christian education".² As far as Ross could see, the very function of Red River was just that: to make possible a settled and civilized life in the wilderness.³

Simpson, in deference to Ross' contribution to the fur trade, granted him a large tract of land in the

old river lot system two kilometres north of Upper Fort Garry. Ross probably taught school in the tiny settlement for a time before establishing a dry goods store on his land. This trade operated with the sanction of the monopolistic HBC and provided the settlers' needs on a daily basis, a type of retailing that the HBC was not yet interested in.⁴ Ross became a link between the company and the settlers and often negotiated on local issues between the two groups. He kept the store at least until 1849 when the Sayer trial effectively broke the Bay's monopoly and ushered in a frantic era of fur trade. Ross also kept a number of cattle and farmed parts of his land.

In 1835, after some clamouring on the part of the colonists, the Council of Assiniboia was formed to advise the Governor of the HBC and to pass by-laws to regulate the affairs of Red River. To this first legislative body in the North West, Alexander Ross was appointed a councillor and sheriff over the colony. A.S. Morton observed that a seat on the Council was an indicator as to who qualified as a member of the local elite,⁵ and his duties in maintaining order brought him into continuous contact with the activities of the colony and its hinterland.

Alexander Ross had built a commodious house for his growing family which he named "Colony Gardens", referring to nearby Fort Douglas, the centre of the Scottish colony. This house (Plate 8) was built ca. 1826 at the base of the river lot further north than the second Ross House. It was of the Red River frame construction which had been lathed and plastered. The roof had formerly been thatched as Ross himself observed that there were few "who do indulge in the luxury of singled houses."⁶

Colony Gardens was more than the abode for the 10 Ross children over the years. It was the centre of considerable intellectual activity as Alexander, Sarah and their children met with the prominent members of Red River. James Ross, at the occasion of his father's death in 1856 wrote:

I am sure the house at Colony Gardens must be a lonely place now. How different from former years! That place was all life - people visiting - friends coming and greeting each other joyfully...⁷

Ross was an author of some talent, whose first two books on the fur trade in the Columbia and Oregon districts,⁸ served as apprenticeship for his invaluable history of his environs, The Red River Settlement. This book is used to the present day as the standard description of early Red River and has kept the Ross name in the foreground of Manitoba's historians.

But in Ross' own estimate, his most fruitful energies went towards furthering the Presbyterian cause in the west. By the charter granted to Lord Selkirk in 1812, the Hudson's Bay Company had also promised a minister to tend to the spiritual needs of the highland Scots Colonists. In 1819, the HBC did send out an Anglican minister who adapted his service to remove those aspects most offensive to the Presbyterians, but in the eyes of the faithful this was not sufficient. Alexander Ross spearheaded a thirty-year campaign that consisted of letters, petitions and bills of rights to the London Committee and to the church in Canada and Scotland. Their dogged perseverance paid off with the coming of the Rev. John Black in 1851 and the construction of Kildonan Church on the Frog Plain.⁹ After its opening, three hundred people who had worshipped for years at St. John's Cathedral picked up to attend their own new church.

Ross was a devoted father to his children and was particularly sensitive to the role of the Métis progeny living in and around Red River. He foresaw long in advance the problem of the stifled and isolated economy which could not accommodate the upcoming numbers of misplaced country born men with rising expectations. The buffalo hunt, that institution of the Métis, was clearly coming to an end as the buffalo dwindled in numbers, and yet farming did not seem to be a likely alternative to these native sons and daughters. Further, the French and English or Scottish heritage made for two separate groups of country born with less in common than was expected.¹⁰

In 1849, Ross wrote to Governor Coldwell that the young men of mixed blood were troublesome because, while educated, they had been permitted no real place in the upper class. They sank to the lower class in frustration and led it.¹¹ Ross was absolutely determined that this would not be the case with his own children. They were advanced in education and Christian values that could not fail as a good example. William Ross, the builder of Ross House, was appointed as sheriff after his

father resigned the post in 1851, and was given the additional job as first postmaster for Red River. Henrietta Ross, a cultured and beautiful girl, was married to Rev. John Black of the new Kildonan parish, and she remained prominent in the society throughout their stay at Kildonan. Mary married Rev. George Flett who was the first Métis ordained as a Presbyterian minister in the West.¹² James Ross studied at the University of Toronto where he received a gold medal for his work. When his older brother William died, James was given the positions of sheriff and postmaster. He studied law and journalism and was a gifted scholar of keen ambition.¹³

The children themselves were conscious of the pressure on them from their father and from their society and were resolved to set a good example as Métis citizens. At the death of his father, James wrote home to his sisters and brother:

we at present occupy a certain standing in the community. Owing to Papa and William - and to our connection with our worthy minister Mr. Black...we have a certain standing and respectability, and we must keep it... We must show ourselves worthy of that esteem by our doings.¹⁴

William, the second son of Alexander, was born in the Columbia River in the Rockies in 1825 and was brought by his mother on horseback in 1826 to Red River. He was educated, seemingly entirely in the settlement for there is no correspondence from him outside of Red River. William put in some time working on the brigades down to Pembina in which his father also had some interest in the 1840s. He married Jemima McKenzie, who was also the daughter of an old fur trader. He may have continued to live at Colony Gardens for the first years of married life but as the marriage began to produce children, it was obvious that separate quarters were in order. William rented a cottage adjacent to Lower Fort Garry in 1852-53,¹⁵ and by 1852 he began to build Ross House near the bank of the eastern part of the Ross estate. The flood of 1852 delayed an actual start to the house but by June of the following year, William complained to his brother James that although the frame of his new house was up, a shortage of wood was delaying further construction.¹⁶

Aggravations heaped upon William and his family. In August, 1854, they had waited for a plasterer

to finish the house for a month and in November, some of the interior finishing had still not been done because of the shortage of workmen.¹⁷ His sister Margaret's husband, Hugh Mattison of Kildonan, had done much of the carpenter work and a dry sink of pine still in the house attests to his skill.

The Ross Family probably moved into their new log house shortly after the New Year in 1855. Alexander Ross declared to his son James that William's house was "the prettiest in Red River",¹⁸ with the cost in excess of £252. It was only appropriate for William to have such a fine home because he had certainly a level of prominence in the settlements as the new sheriff, councillor to Assiniboia, a magistrate and keeper of the jail. Even Alexander Ross, who was always so apprehensive of his Métis children had to admit that William was "in a fair way of becoming respectable."¹⁹

In addition to these honours and duties, William was appointed the first postmaster to the settlement. Inhabitants had urged the Council for years to establish a regular mail service through Pembina, which also served as another way of asserting their identity as separate from the covetous Yankees to the south.

For the grand salary of £5 a year, Ross ran the post office from his new home which made it a bustle of activity and a regular meeting place for local people. In his year as postmaster, Ross handled 2,912 letters, 2,437 newspapers and 580 parcels.²⁰ Letters were addressed simply to "Red River, British North America". The mail was taken by runner to Pembina and then through Minnesota to the east and on to a destination. Despite a three to four week travel time to Canada, this system was more efficient than it had been previously.

William Ross died on May 6, 1856 after living in his house less than two years. He had been ill since late March, but his death was a real shock to the family. He left his wife and four children and another baby on the way.²¹ The whole settlement followed his coffin to its burial in the churchyard at Frog Plain in Kildonan, which his father had laboured so long to establish. In October of that

same year, Alexander Ross, one of the most respected and prominent men of Red River, joined his son in the Kildonan Cemetery and the Ross family was left without its two pillars.

Jemima Ross had been left all her husband's property which was about 90 acres of the original grant from Sir George Simpson. Some of Ross's possessions, as well as an endowment, were to go to the children, especially the child who was born after his death, Jemima Isabella. Should Mrs. Ross remarry, the children would jointly inherit the property.²²

In October, 1860, Jemima Ross did remarry, to William Coldwell who had come to Red River the year before. Coldwell was born in London and raised and educated in Ireland. He was younger than Jemima by almost 10 years and was only 26 years of age when he married her. He had apprenticed in Dublin as a copysetter and proofreader for a newspaper and came to work for the Globe in Toronto. The editor of the Globe, George Brown, had for several years been a firm advocate of Canada's expansion into the west, and had actively campaigned against the Hudson's Bay Company's charter over the area. William Coldwell and William Buckingham, also of the Globe, came to Red River with a policy ready made for them. Together they established the Nor'Wester which from the start wrote of the inevitability of change from colonial status. The first issue, December 28, 1859, predicted that "the country in the Northwest cannot remain unpeopled. The printing press will hasten the change."²³

Coldwell later wrote that the two young newsmen were greater monopolists than they chose to be. "We were our own editors, reporters, compositors, pressmen, news boys, and general delivery agents."²⁴ The Nor'Wester continued to be instrumental by its policies in bringing about union with Canada, and it was the only paper in Red River until the time of the Riel Rebellion.

Buckingham left the Nor'Wester in 1860 and was replaced by James Ross who had moved back to Red River to take control of the Ross family affairs. Ross had also been appointed sheriff and postmaster, in his family's long tradition, but he lost those jobs because of his heavy involvement in the political policies of his paper, and his attacks upon the HBC. Ross was thrown together with the

Canada Party and when he left the paper in 1863, he was succeeded as editor by John Christian Schultz, an even more vigorous promoter for annexation of the country to Canada. James Ross joined the staff of Brown's Globe in Toronto and continued to plead Red River's case to Canada.²⁵

Coldwell left the paper in 1864 and took Jemima Ross Coldwell and their family to settle in Toronto where James and his family were living. Ross house was probably rented or simply maintained by the remaining family members. In 1869, the Coldwells returned to their Red River home which they called "Brookbank" because of its proximity to Brown's Creek.

Concerned for the colony which was in a turbulent state over the Métis unrest, James moved back to Colony Gardens, also in 1869. Ross was elected to represent Kildonan in Riel's provisional government and became a "spokesman for the English as definitely as Riel was for the French."²⁶ When the settlement met with Donald Smith to work out the terms of union with Canada, Ross represented the parish of St. John's, and was a contributor to the List of Rights presented to the House of Commons in Ottawa. Coldwell would certainly have been a partner to his brother-in-law in these dealings for the two had always been similar in their vision of the future for Red River.

James Ross left for Toronto in the summer of 1870 while William and Jemima Coldwell settled back into their life in Ross House. Coldwell edited the new paper, The Manitoban, which was a small, political paper which represented the original inhabitants of Red River rather than the newer elements. After that, he spent ten years as a parliamentary reporter for the Free Press. His obituary stated that he had been an invalid since 1889, but his personal papers show this period to begin more about 1885.

Although Jemima had been willed the Ross property only as long as she remained a widow, she seemed to have reached an agreement with her children which left the property more or less in her control. Son William and daughter Margaret leased a part of Brookbank from their mother for a nominal fee, and other parts of the land were rented out also. Over the years, parts of the long lot were parcelled off and either sold or rented by agreement between Jemima Coldwell and the Ross

children.

The Coldwell Papers in the Provincial Archives have some of the land transactions for the Ross estate, but there are certain items of the estate proceedings that are not in the papers.²⁸ There is a story often repeated that Jemima Ross Coldwell gave land to the city for the city hall and sold some land for a nominal sum for Market Square,²⁹ but this was not proven. The lots west of Main Street were sold off rather early, partly by Jemima and partly by the other children of the third generation of Rosses.

Being so centrally located the estate was also subject to expropriation and direct purchase for several projects. For example, in 1886, the Winnipeg Transfer Railway bought a right-of-way on the land for \$5,150, and again in 1889 they purchased some of the land.³⁰ When Market Street was extended in 1894-95 a part of the land quite near the family homes was expropriated and the Coldwells were boxed into that portion of their land east of present day Rorie Street. William, Ross, and Jemima (now Elgin) streets bear witness to the impact of the Ross family on the development of that area.

Colony Gardens, the Alexander Ross homestead, was torn down about 1885. Old Sarah Ross, the Indian mother of the 10 Ross children, died in her home in February 1884. The Coldwells continued to live in Ross House from 1869 to 1907. William Coldwell was not able to work from the mid-1880s onward and spent virtually all of his time reading and receiving guests who visited Brookbank by the score. Because he had no appreciable income, the Coldwells lived off the sale and rents of Jemima's property, but this was split among the many Ross descendants. The Coldwells had at least three children of their own and in his last years, William had moved in with his son George in Victoria to escape the harsh Winnipeg climate. An entry in his diary in 1904 tells the story of the old Red River couple:

Then I got out doors for an hour and a half or so. Alex James placed my wheelchair in the sunniest and most sheltered spot - near the kitchen door. As I sit there, Jemima beside me, Bain's were threshing in the adjoining field.³¹

The Coldwells always kept a large garden filled with vegetables and berries. They kept several acres around them until the land was sold after their death but always felt that the city was creeping up to their home.

To the original Red River frame home which William Ross finished in 1854 or 1855, the Coldwells had added a kitchen and a rear porch. The kitchen was also a Red River frame structure and was finished inside with plaster and white wash. In the winter, they had to bank earth and hay against the walls in an effort to keep it warm. The present kitchen in Ross house was used as a dining room, and the Coldwells always kept carpeting on its floor. It was in this room that the Carron stove was found and in winter they brought in a coal-burning stove, which was stored upstairs in the summer. Both stoves had separate chimneys although only the Carron stove chimney remains. A large coal box was located near the house.

William Coldwell slept in the parlour during the winter to keep extra warm. When the Ross and Coldwell children were all at home, they slept in a large attic which had a set of heavy stairs held up by a rope, which led from the kitchen/dining room.

A cutaway section of the wall in the interior of Ross House shows its construction (see Plate 5). Clay and lime were mixed together for the interior plaster and there is still most of the original plaster under the newer layer. The glass panes in the windows were brought from England and came through Manitoba by York boats.³²

The house was covered up with wood siding, probably not long after it was erected because log cabins had little prestige in Red River. Massive wooden water barrels caught the run-off from the roof but they would have also had a well to tap the ground water near the river. It is not known if the Coldwells kept a barn near the house but a sketch in 1873 shows another large building on the property.

After the Coldwells died, the land and house were sold. Midland Construction bought the building and used it as an office for its lumber yard. The building was saved from demolition in 1947 through purchase by the City of Winnipeg and the Manitoba Historical Society. It was moved to its present site at Sir William Whyte Park across from the C.P.R. station and restored to its present state.

Ross House is in good condition and now has two or three hundred people visit its museum each summer. There are several authentic artifacts in the house, but the real museum is the building itself. It is a tribute both to the early architectural form of Red River and to the Ross family whose influence carried from 1852 to the present century.

FOOTNOTES

1. Professor (George) Bryce, "Alexander Ross - Fur Trader, Author and Philanthropist", Queen's Quarterly, July, 1903, p. 46-49.
2. Ibid, p. 51.
3. W.L. Morton in the introduction to Alexander Ross, The Red River Settlement, Its Rise, Progress and Present State, reprinted by Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton, 1972, p. XV. In this view, he differed fundamentally from Lord Selkirk who had not foreseen the large influx of country born people, the families of retired fur traders and their Indian wives. The colony ultimately came to serve both purposes.
4. This information was relayed by Dr. Fritz Pannekoek who is currently working on Alexander Ross for the Dictionary of Canadian Biography. Also, W.L. Morton, Manitoba: A History, University of Toronto Press, 1957, p. 74.
5. A.S. Morton, A History of the Canadian West to 1871.
6. Alexander Ross, The Red River Settlement, Its Rise, Progress and Present State, reprinted by Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton, 1972, p. 388.
7. Ross Family Papers, P.A.M., No. 200, December 24, 1856.
8. Bryce, op. cit., p. 53.
9. W.L. Morton in Ross, op. cit., p. XXiii
10. Ibid, p. XX.
11. Quoted in E.E. Rich, editor Eden Colville's Letters 1849-52, Hudson's Bay Record Society, Vol. 19, p. liii.
12. "The Sheriff of Assiniboia", The Western Law Times, December, 1891.
13. W.D. Smith, "James Ross", Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. X, University of Toronto Press, p. 629-30.
14. Ross papers, op. cit., No. 200, December 24, 1856.
15. William Lane Correspondence Outward, P.A.M., June 4, 1853, A.W. Buchanan to W. Lane.
16. Ross papers, op. cit., No. 45, June 28, 1853. This shortage of wood was to become chronic for Red River for the next two decades. In this case it may have been the result of a fire in 1852.

17. Ibid., Nos. 99 and 112, August 22 and November 14, 1854.
18. Ibid., No. 100, August 25, 1884.
19. Loc. cit.
20. The Original Ross House, souvenir booklet of the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society, N.D., p. 2.
21. Ross papers, op. cit., genealogy in the finding aid.
22. William Ross will, from the Coldwell Papers, P.A.M.
23. Quoted in J.W. Dafoe, "Early Winnipeg Newspapers", Manitoba Historical Society Transactions, Series III, No. 3, 1947, p. 15.
24. Loc. cit.
25. W.D. Smith, op. cit., p. 630.
26. Loc. cit.
27. Free Press, February 19, 1907.
28. The Coldwell collection includes a series of notes and legal documents of an official nature. In addition, William Coldwell, as a journalist, kept a daily diary in a series of scribblers. These are lengthy in the extreme and are filled with personal notes and a smattering of business affairs. A thorough reading of these diaries would no doubt prove to be an excellent source if a longer study was undertaken.
29. Winnipeg Tribune, May 20, 1967. This article gives the year as 1877.
30. Coldwell papers, op. cit., diary No. 5, 1886.
31. Ibid., diary, 1904.
32. Official Souvenir Booklet, op. cit., p. 4.

140 MEADE STREET – WILLIAM ROSS HOUSE



Plate 1 – William Ross House, ca.1890. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 2 – William Ross House as the office for Midland Construction, Market Avenue, ca.1948. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

140 MEADE STREET – WILLIAM ROSS HOUSE



Plate 3 – Preparations being made to move the house from the foot of Market Avenue (where it was used as an office by Midland Construction) to Sir William Whyte Park, Higgins Avenue, 1948. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 4 – Moving the house from the original site, 1948. W.L. Morton is on the right. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

140 MEADE STREET – WILLIAM ROSS HOUSE



Plate 5 – William Ross House at Sir William Whyte Park, 1955. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

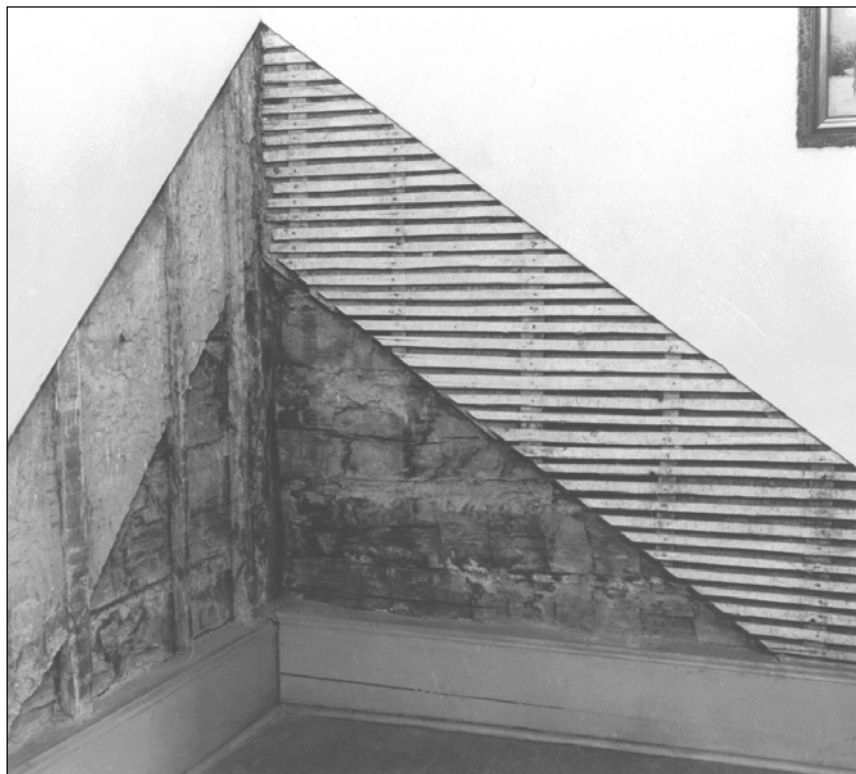


Plate 6 – Detail of interior construction, 1958. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

140 MEADE STREET – WILLIAM ROSS HOUSE



Plate 7 – Parlour, as a museum, ca.1955. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Margaret Kennedy Collection.)



Plate 8 – Kitchen, as a museum, with the original carron stove, ca.1955. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Margaret Kennedy Collection.)

140 MEADE STREET – WILLIAM ROSS HOUSE



Plate 9 – “Colony Gardens,” no date. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 10 – William Coldwell, seated outside of Ross House, ca.1890. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)

140 MEADE STREET – WILLIAM ROSS HOUSE



Plate 11 – William Coldwell, seated outside of Ross House, with Jemima (McKenzie Ross) Coldwell and grandson Clarence James, ca.1898. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)



Plate 12 – Left to right: Leo Lander, Mrs. George Flett and William Coldwell, sitting in Ross House, 1901. (Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.)