

IV.—*The Assiniboine River and its Forts.*

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The City of Winnipeg stands at the point of junction of the Assiniboine with the Red River. The former river runs through a district of marvellous fertility, and though not more than one hundred and twenty yards wide at its mouth, is found winding its way through the prairies for four hundred miles. No less than twenty forts have been erected on its banks, and the history of the earliest of these goes back to more than one hundred and fifty years ago. We shall endeavour to bring together the more interesting features of this history.

## THE NAME ASSINIBOINE.

The name of the river seems to have been taken from the designation of a tribe of Indians living on the banks. The word is probably Cree or Ojibway, and was applied to the people called the "Assiniboines" or "Stonies." The tribe bearing the name was of Sioux origin, and had broken off on account of a social dispute from the Dakota nation and lived on friendly terms with the Crees. That this breach was of ancient date is shown by a letter written from Fort Bourbon in 1695, which says: "It is said that the Assiniboines are a nation of the Sioux, which separated from them a long time ago." Dr. Neill, the historian of Minnesota, states that the Dakota tradition is that a quarrel over an affair of love took place between two Sioux families near Big Stone Lake, at the head of the Red River, which resulted in the separation of the Assiniboines, who hence bore the name "Stone Indians," though called by the Dakotas "Hohays." Whether from this derivation, or from the stones, gravel or rock exposures found at the rapids of the river on which this tribe of the Sioux have since been found, it is certain that in 1798, David Thompson, surveyor of the North-West Company, called the river "Stone Indian River."

## DERIVATION OF "ASSINIBOINE."

The best philologists derive the name from the Cree "Assiniy" or Ojibway "Assin," a stone; and the Cree "Pwat" (Ojibway "Bwan") a Sioux Indian. Hence the English Hudson's Bay Company (1744) meeting the Muskegan or Swamp Crees used their word "Assinapoets," but as the Ojibway country was reached by the French on their way to the North-West, the form "Assiniboine" came into general use. Another derivation has been suggested. This is from the Ojibway "Assin," a stone, and the French "bouillir," to boil. The reference is to a custom of this tribe of heating stones and casting them into water to make it boil. The custom was a real one but was not confined to this tribe, and the derivation is more specious than probable. In connection with the use of the word in

the name "Assiniboia" given by Lord Selkirk to his colony on this and the Red River a curious statement was made. This was in Chappell's Voyage to Hudson Bay (1814); the writer says: "The infant colony is called by His Lordship Osna Boia (two Gaelic words signifying "Ossian's town") from the resemblance between that and the Indian name of Red River, "Asnaboyme." However consoling this may be to the Highlander, it must be consigned to the limbo of fanciful conceits.

#### THE SPELLING.

The following are several of the different ways of spelling the name :—

Assinipoels,	(Margry after Joliet, 1671).	Assinipoulacs,	(French map, 1680).
Assiniboels,	(Margry after Verandrye, 1730, and Bourgainville, 1757).	Asseniboels,	(Franquelin's map, 1688).
Assiniboin,	} (D'Iberville, 1702).	Assinebouels,	(Map, 1692).
Assinibouel,		Assenipoils,	(De l'Isle's map, 1700).
Assinipoets,	(Robson, 1759).	Assinipoils,	(Carver, 1766).
Assinipolis,	(De la Harpe).	Assiniboilles,	(Map of 1740).
Assenepolacs,	(Duluth, 1684).	Assinibouels,	(Map of 1744).
Assinipouals,	(Lahontan, 1703).	Assinibouans,	(John McDonnell, 1793).
Assinipoulak,	(Marquette's map of 1673).	Ossiniboyne,	(Selkirk settlers).

#### THE ASSINIBOINE OCCUPIED.

The fur trade was the cause of the first occupation of the valley of the Assiniboine. Several companies, with conflicting interests, found it profitable to extend their trade along the valley, and within its limits were enacted a number of the most sanguinary conflicts of the fur country. It is more than a century and a half since the first European explored the Assiniboine, although as our list of the different forms of the name shows, the country of the "wild Assiniboine" was known to geographers more than two hundred years ago. Four movements claim our attention in this earlier history.

#### I.—THE FRENCH PERIOD, (1736-63).

So far as we can ascertain, it was by the French explorer Varennes de la Verandrye, who, after leaving Lake Superior in 1731 and threading the watery ways of Rainy Lake and River, Lake of the Woods and Winnipeg River, across Lake Winnipeg, came up the Red River in 1735 or 1736, that the mouth of the Assiniboine, where the City of Winnipeg now stands, was first seen by white men. Some question has arisen as to whether or not there was a French fort built at the mouth of the Assiniboine. It may be well to notice again the grounds for believing that there was such a fort, as given by the writer in a paper read before this Society in 1886.

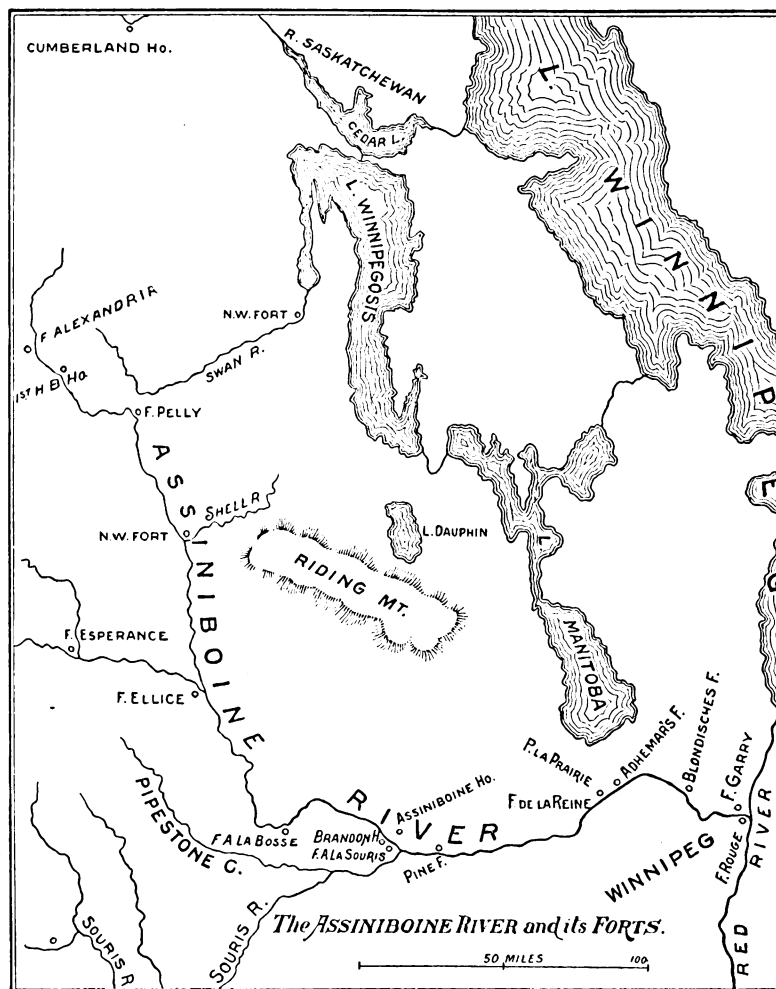
#### FORT ROUGE.

(1.) In the French archives at Paris is a map, of date 1737, showing at the mouth of the Assiniboine, and on the south side, a fort marked "abandoned," so that it could only have been in existence for two years at most.

(2.) A map in the Department of Marine, Paris, claiming to be of 1740, gives Fort Rouge at the mouth of the Assiniboine, and on the south side of it.

(3.) On a map in Paris, of date 1750, at the mouth of the Assiniboine, on the south side, is a fort marked "Ancien Fort," showing that for a number of years it had been given up.

(4.) A map of the Department of Marine, Paris, bearing date 1750, places Fort Rouge on the Assiniboine, at its mouth.



(5.) In the journal of John McDonnell, published by ex-governor Masson (1889), occurs as follows:—"At the Forks (*i. e.* of Red and Assiniboine rivers), the remains of several old forts are still (1793) to be seen, some of which were built as far back as the time of the French government (*i. e.* before 1763)."

(6.) Parkman in his new book (1892), "A half century of conflict," states that Verandrye erected six fortified posts during the first few years of explorations, and "besides these he built another post called Fort Rouge on the site of the City of Winnipeg—which was not long occupied."

## FORT DE LA REINE.

Verandrye and his sons pushed up the Assiniboine, and we learn that on October 3rd, 1738, fifty or sixty miles from the mouth of the river they began to build Fort de la Reine. This fort seems to have been on the north side of the river, and to have marked the south end of the portage, or Indian carrying place, to Lake Manitoba. Exactly at what point on the river this fort was situated we can hardly now determine, though on the bank of the river south of the present Town of Portage la Prairie seems the most likely spot. Several of the early maps give the site of Fort de la Reine at the northern bend of the river, near the present village of Poplar Point. John McDonnell in the account of Red River (1793-97) speaks of a French commercial settlement a day's journey from the mouth of the Assiniboine, probably about the site of the Hudson's Bay Company establishment of recent days known as "White Horse Plains." This he calls Blondishe's Fort, and the trader says:—"Blondishe's Fort is the first we come to; next to it is Fort la Reine according to some, but others say that Fort la Reine stood at the Portage la Prairie." The same writer speaks of another trading station of the French period, "Adhemar's Fort," which was south of the present High Bluff Station of the C. P. R.

McDonnell says:—"by land the distance does not exceed six miles from Portage la Prairie."

Fort la Reine became the headquarters of the French operations in the North-West. From this centre the expedition departed, by which the sons of Verandrye discovered the Rocky Mountains (1743), and at Fort la Reine, Legardeur de St. Pierre wintered in 1752, but on the French leaving it in that year the fort was burnt to the ground by the Assiniboine Indians.

## POPLAR FORT.

Another reminder of the French period is found in the site of Poplar Fort (le Fort des Trembles), nine miles south-west of Portage la Prairie. Its site is still marked by the thick belt of poplar trees extending out on the plain. It is worthy of note that the name St. Charles given to the Assiniboine by Verandrye still lingers among the old French half-breeds of the river, and one of the best known French parishes on the Assiniboine bears the name St. Charles.

Sixty or seventy miles south-west of Portage la Prairie by land, the Souris or Mouse River, called by Verandrye, St. Pierre, empties into the Assiniboine. We have no exact traces of fort or settlement during the French period at that point. But Margry says:—"This point was the centre of the establishments and the point of departure of the expeditions which the explorers intended to make to the south and to the north." Harmon in 1805 says of it:—"It is now more than fifty years since a French missionary left this place, and the prayers then taught the natives have not been forgotten." We know that in 1738 the River Souris was used to reach the country of the Mandans, and in 1742 Verandrye's sons crossed the plains from the Souris to the Missouri, ascended it and saw at a distance the Rocky Mountains. It would seem that from the junction of the Assiniboine and Souris rivers, expeditions to the north were undertaken by which Lake Dauphin and Lake Bourbon, where forts were built, were reached, and even the great Saskatchewan explored to the Forks and beyond. The French period of exploration was one of great

energy, and probably not less than six or eight commercial establishments or forts were founded in the valley of the Assiniboine.

## II.—THE NORTH-WEST FUR COMPANY.

The check given the fur trade by the transfer of Canada to the British (1759-63) was short. Two Scottish merchants of Montreal organized expeditions to penetrate the fur country. It was in 1766 that the Montreal merchants reached Kaministiquia on Lake Superior, and soon after (1770) Thomas Curry penetrated to Cedar Lake on the Saskatchewan, and carried on a successful trade. James Finlay followed Curry and reached far distant Athabasca. The brothers, Frobisher, the determined merchant Simon McTavish and the firm of Gregory, McLeod & Co., became rivals in this enterprise. It was in 1783-84 that a combination took place under the name of "The North-West Fur Company," and in 1790 the reorganized company contained almost all the fur traders of Montreal. It would seem that the impulse of this union led to the fuller occupation of the Assiniboine valley. To us the natural entrance to this valley is by way of the Red River; but it was from the headwaters of the Assiniboine, from the direction of the Saskatchewan and Lake Winnipeg, that the occupation came. By coming to Lake Winnipegosis and ascending the Swan River (always a fur-trader's paradise), a short portage led to the upper Assiniboine.

### FORT ESPERANCE.

The oldest fort in the Assiniboine valley built by the North-westers appears to have been Fort Esperance, and that on a branch of the Assiniboine. It is declared by John McDonnell to have been "two short days' march" from the junction of the Qu'Appelle (usually written in the early records QuiAppelle) River and the Assiniboine, probably near the mouth of Cut Arm Creek. Fort Esperance would seem to have been built by Mr. Robert Grant, a bourgeois of the North-West Company, a year or two after 1780. According to David Thompson it was in  $50^{\circ} 28' 58''$  and  $101^{\circ} 45' 45''$  West.

### FORT ALEXANDRIA.

In the year 1800 Harmon describes this fort:—"The fort is built on a small rise of ground, on the banks of the Assiniboine or upper Red River, that separates it from a beautiful prairie about ten miles long and from one to four broad, which is as level as the floor of a house. At a little distance behind the fort are small groves of birch, poplar, aspen and pine. On the whole the scenery around it is delightful. The fort is sixteen rods (256 feet) in length by twelve (196 feet) in breadth; the houses, stores, etc., are well built, are plastered on the inside and outside, and are washed over with a white earth, which answers nearly as well as lime for whitewashing. This earth is found in certain places in all parts of the country." The position of Alexandria is given by Harmon as  $52^{\circ}$  N. and  $103^{\circ}$  W. John McDonnell states that Fort Tremblante (named from the common poplar or aspen) is a little farther from Shell River than Shell River is from the Qu'Appelle. A glance at the map shows that Fort Tremblante (1793) and Alexandria (1800) were in about the same locality. Probably the name Tremblante was changed to Alexandria in honour of Sir Alexander Mackenzie, for so the tradition goes.

Sec. II., 1892. 10.

Connected with this locality is the name of Cuthbert Grant. Cuthbert Grant, Sr., the father of Cuthbert Grant, who became so celebrated as a half-breed leader in 1816, was the explorer of the Upper Assiniboine. He took up his abode on his first arrival in the district at the point known as River Tremblante. This was as early as 1790—probably earlier. The explorer was afterwards sent up the Saskatchewan and John McDonald of Garth makes a touching reference to his death (1799) as follows:—"Spring came on and Mr. Grant feeling quite ill, I had to fit him out a comfortable awning in one of the boats to take him down the river to Cumberland House. We got Mr. Grant to Kaminitiquia where he soon died." It is worthy of notice that in this, since known as the Fort Pelly district, which John McDonnell says was "Cuthbert Grant's favourite residence," his great grandson, Cuthbert McKay, a Red River half-breed known to the writer, established among his Indian relations what is now the successful Presbyterian Crowstand Mission, and died earnestly working for his kindred.

From the records of the time we learn also that a small fort was built at Shell River (La Coquille) by the trader Peter Grant in 1794, but that it was trifling and could not compete with Fort Esperance to the south or Fort Tremblante on the north.

#### MOUNTAIN À LA BOSSE.

After leaving the junction of the Qu'Appelle River with the Assiniboine, the latter runs east and south, until when within about fifty miles from the United States boundary it turns directly east. A few miles east of this turn stood a fort about the beginning of this century, which was of some importance. It was some distance from the present town of Virden on the C. P. R. Harmon incorrectly speaks of it as "Mountain à la basse" but undoubtedly the French word "bosse," a "hump," referring to the shape of the hill near it, is correct. Palliser's map and also Hind's sketch map mark a spot north of Oak Lake, known as "Boss Hill," which is plainly a corruption of the old name. The writer has been over the ground, but without being able to identify the site of the fort. The reason of this is no doubt to be found in the statement made by John McDonnell:—"The Mountain à la Bosse, a north-west fort, has been frequently established and as often abandoned, owing to the oppositions that come into that quarter, as these gentlemen when by themselves establish as few posts as they conveniently can, in order to save property. On the contrary when incommoded by new comers, they subdivide and divert the trade into as many little channels as they have men and clerks to occupy, well knowing that their opponents, who have but few goods generally, cannot oppose them at every place." This no doubt accounts for the shifting nature of some of the posts, which are continually appearing and disappearing from the view of the historian.

#### PINE FORT AND ASSINIBOINE HOUSE.

Coming down the Assiniboine with their trade it became the habit of the North-westerners to follow the Assiniboine and Red Rivers to Lake Winnipeg and on return to bring goods for the western trade by this route. Accordingly about eighteen miles below the junction of the Souris with the Assiniboine it was found convenient to have a post for distributing the supplies brought up by the canoes. At this point was built in 1785 what was called Pine Fort. This place was however abandoned by the traders when

they built in 1795 the Assiniboine House, a little above the mouth of the Souris, and if tradition is to be followed, on the north side of the Assiniboine. Thompson placed this fort in  $49^{\circ} 40' 56''$  N. and  $99^{\circ} 27' 15''$ . This fort became of great importance as the depot for expeditions to the Mandans of the Missouri River. There is the record of an expedition in 1804 from this place, which met on the Missouri the celebrated party of Lewis and Clark on their way across the continent. We shall see that the mouth of the Souris became the key of the western trade.

### III.—THE X Y COMPANY.

In 1795 great discussions took place among the Nor'-Westers, and in the following year Forsyth, Richardson & Co., of Montreal, began an opposition trade as a separate company. Alexander Mackenzie sympathized with these discontented partners, although he did not join them till 1799. This opposition company was known as the "New North-West Company" (see page 483 Masson's *Bourgeois* Vol. 2), or "Sir Alexander Mackenzie & Co.," or better still as the "X Y Company." Though the X Y Company was absorbed in the coalition of 1804 after an eight years' existence, yet its operations were conducted with great vigour; and included the valley of the Assiniboine. We have information that there was an X Y fort near that of the Nor'-Westers on the Qu'Appelle, and that in 1804 the X Y Company erected a new fort five miles above Alexandria on the Upper Assiniboine. At the mouth of the Souris in 1795 there were five rival forts. These were the newly founded Hudson's Bay Company fort, of which we shall speak, that of the Nor'-Westers, and no doubt the trading house of Forsyth, Richardson & Co., besides two smaller concerns. There is the evidence of the trader John Pritchard, that he was at the X Y fort à la Souris in 1805, no doubt while it was passing over to the new company, and it is known that this trader was in charge in 1807 of the same fort then under the auspices of the North-West Company.

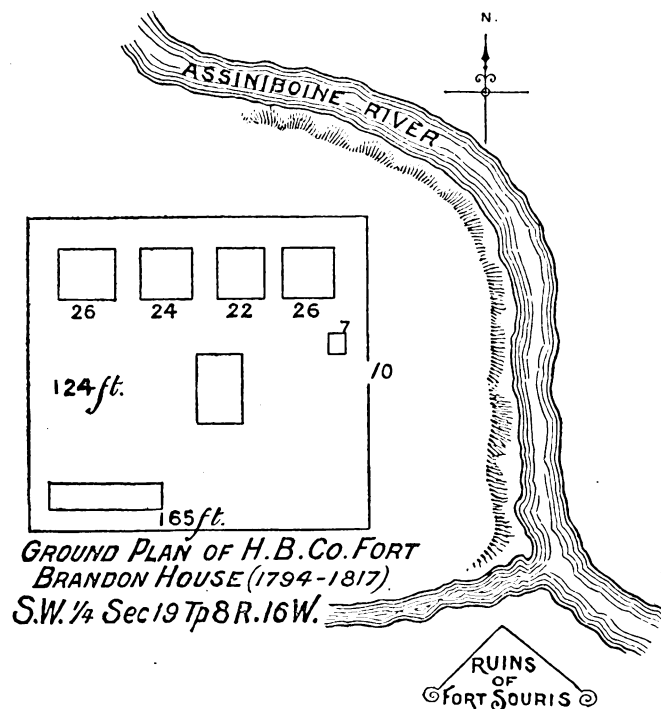
### IV.—THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY.

The steady-going old Hudson's Bay Company, from the beginning of its career in 1670, had for a hundred years drawn by the magnetism of its name and wealth the Indian tribes of the interior to trade with it on the shores of Hudson Bay. The pushing traders of Montreal were, however, becoming formidable, and having penetrated the wilds were cutting off the sources of the English trade. The formal pledge to a decisive battle was given when Joseph Frobisher, on behalf of the Montreal traders in 1772, erected a fort near Sturgeon Lake on the Saskatchewan. This was a strategic point, and threatened to cut off both the north and south supplies of trade that had gone down to Hudson Bay. Immediate steps were taken by the great English company to penetrate the country from the Bay, and in 1774 Samuel Hearn, who had already gained a reputation by the discovery of the Coppermine River, arrived at the Saskatchewan, and five hundred yards distant from the new fort of their Montreal opponents erected Cumberland House. Now began a struggle of the giants. Shortly after 1780 as we have seen, the Nor'-Westers by way of Swan River occupied the Assiniboine valley. Following in their wake the Hudson's Bay Company crossed from Lake Winnipeg, through Lake Winnipegosis, and erected an establishment about 1790 near the mouth of Swan River. This they deserted shortly

after and built a fort some nine miles below Fort Alexandria on the Assiniboine, a few miles north-west of the site of the present Fort Pelly. This was the first Hudson's Bay Company House on the Assiniboine.

#### BRANDON HOUSE.

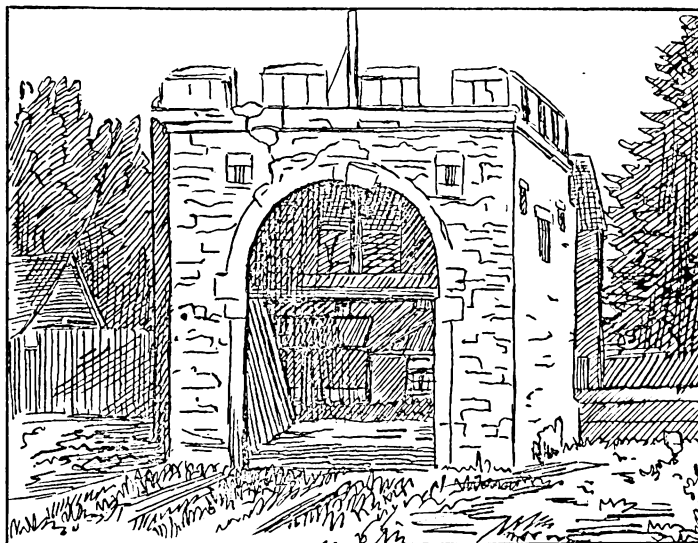
Determined, when once it had undertaken the task, to cover the whole country with its forts, the Hudson's Bay Company was so energetic that we find the Nor'-Westers complaining that their rivals could enter the River Dauphin, out of Lake Winnipeg, a month earlier than they were able to do, and thus secure most of the trade. Pursuing their new policy of aggression the Hudson's Bay Company descended from the headwaters of the Assiniboine, and a couple of miles above the mouth of the Souris River founded in 1794, the historic fort known as Brandon House. On the grassy bank of the Assiniboine the writer some time ago found the remains of the old fort, and from the well preserved character of the sod was able to make out the line of the palisades, the exact size of all the buildings, and to give the ground plan as here shown.



The fort was on the south side of the Assiniboine about seventeen miles below the present City of Brandon. It is situated on the homestead of Mr. George Mair, a Canadian settler from Beauharnois, Quebec, who settled here on 20th July, 1879. He is proud of the possession which he by good chance obtained, and keeps the plot in good order. The site was well chosen at a bend of the river, having the Assiniboine in front of it on the east and partially so also on the north. The front of the palisade faced to the east, and midway in the wall was a gate ten feet wide, with inside of it a look-out seven feet square. On the south side was the long storehouse marked. In the centre had stood a building



said by some to have been the blacksmith's shop. Along the north wall were the buildings for residences and other purposes. Across the ravine to the south and east are the remains of another fort, generally thought to have been Fort à la Souris of the X Y Company. This had probably become the fort of the North-West Company after the fusion of 1804, for we learn that during the troubles of 1812-17 Brandon House and the North-West fort were within gun-shot of one another. On the north side of the river, and some distance down the river may still be seen a gap in the woods, where there are traces of another fort, and indications point to it having been Assiniboine or Stone Indian House described by David Thompson and already referred to.



Front gateway. Only fragment remaining (1892) of Fort Garry (1835-82.)

#### DAYS OF CONFLICT.

In the fierce contest between Lord Selkirk and the North-West Company (1812-17) the forts of the Assiniboine played an important part. It was at Brandon House that the seizure of pemican took place that brought on the hostilities. It was on the Qu'Appelle River in 1816 that the Half-breeds or Bois-brulés, under young Cuthbert Grant, organized their party to attack Fort Douglas—Lord Selkirk's fort within the limits of the present City of Winnipeg. As soon as the grass had started in the spring of 1816 it was down the Assiniboine the invading force came, taking a contingent from each fort, to make the attack of the 19th of June, by which Governor Robert Semple and twenty of his officers and men fell. The monument of "Seven Oaks" erected last year by the Manitoba Historical Society marks the scene of this tragedy.

#### RECENT FORTS.

The union of the Hudson's Bay and North-West Companies in 1821 led to a change in the distribution of the forts along the Assiniboine River. Fort Pelly, named after a governor of the Company, served for the Upper Assiniboine. Fort Qu'Appelle was placed in the beautiful spot now occupied, ninety miles west of old Fort Esperance. Near the

mouth of the Qu'Appelle, at its junction with the Assiniboine, was erected Fort Ellice, so called after the prominent fur trader Edward Ellice, formerly of the X Y Company. The forts at the mouth of the Souris, at one time so numerous and so important, fell, after the conflict of the companies, out of sight, and perished either by fire or by disuse. The union of the companies led to the building of the first Fort Garry on the Assiniboine, south of the site of the present Hudson's Bay Company mill in the City of Winnipeg. In 1835 the second Fort Garry was begun under Governor Alexander Christie, and stood facing the Assiniboine at the point still marked by the ruined front gate west of Main street in the City of Winnipeg. It was the centre of much of the history of the country until its sale in the year 1881-82, when by an act of vandalism it was pulled down, and its walls and bastions which might have spoken to us of the scenes of the fur trade and of the Selkirk colony, are to be seen no more. The Assiniboine is now the abode of the farmer; the fur trader has deserted it for the far north. But the record of a century and a half, including the events of the French, the Nor'-Wester and the Hudson's Bay Company movements, will ever be of interest to us; and this, though as Governor Masson says, in closing his sketch of the North-West Company, "The Lords of the lakes and forests have passed away."