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**Keeping Loyalty and Regulating Insubordination:
Freemen and the Edmonton House Fur Trade, 1821-
1828**

On Friday the 10th of August 1827, as the men of Edmonton House neared the end of a week cutting hay in the rain, which Chief Factor John Rowand feared would “all be spoiled by the wet weather,” and a second day without food; a Freeman hunter named LeBlanc “arrived with two fine Buck red Deer,” and staved off their hunger.¹ Freeman were former fur company servants, who opted to become independent hunters, trappers, and traders upon completing their contracts. These Hudson’s Bay Company’s (HBC) and Northwest Company (NWC) servants would marry Indigenous women and build trade alliances with their families, while retaining relationships with the fur companies. In the lead-up to the 1821 HBC-NWC merger, competition between the two companies was leading to violence. Both companies benefited from trade with Freeman bands. The HBC and NWC would compete for their allegiance, with preferential prices, rations, and goods. After the merger, HBC support for Freeman bands waned as there was no longer a competitive incentive to their trade relationships. HBC Northern Department Governor George Simpson tried to limit the numbers and influence of the Freeman. To prevent the population from growing, he offered free passage and allowances to servants who would go to Red River upon completing their contracts. He cut rations to those who remained. To conserve fur bearing animal populations he tried to get them to hunt in the Rocky Mountains or to the south to limit the depletion of fur supplies. While the decline in HBC support was meant to curtail the numbers and influence of Freeman bands, it catalysed their independence and self-reliance as distinct socio-cultural groups.² As the HBC struggled with staffing and financial

¹ John Rowand, 10 August 1827, HBCA, B.60/a/25, Edmonton House Saskatchewan Journal, 1827-28, p. 231.

² Ted Binnema and Gerhard J. Ens, eds., *Hudson's Bay Company Edmonton House Journals: Reports from the Saskatchewan District, Including the Bow River Expedition, 1821-1826* (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 2016), xciv.

losses immediately following the merger, Fort Edmonton came to increasingly rely on the services of Freeman in the 1820s.

This paper examines the Edmonton House Journals and district reports from 1820-1829 to assess the relationship between the HBC and Freeman over the decade immediately following the merger. I argue that although numbers of Freeman associated with Edmonton House decreased substantially as Freeman moved to the Red River and Columbia River regions after the merger, Freeman associated with Edmonton House provided an essential supply of food and fur that bolstered both the viability and profitability of the post, and served as an invaluable buffer between the HBC and Indigenous peoples.³ Freeman often moved fluidly between bush and post, procuring food and furs for the fort, at times engaging in contract labour around the fort, or accompanying trapping and exploration missions alongside fort employees. The Freeman were not a homogenous group, and there were several factors such as ethnicity, place of origin, hunting ability, relationships with local Indigenous peoples, size of family, and loyalty to the HBC, that dictated their relationship to Edmonton. Throughout the 1820s, there were many Freeman who departed for Red River, while some remained in close trade and contractual relationships with the Fort, some defected to the Americans, and some struggled as hunters and remained dependent on the charity of the post. By the end of the decade, many Freeman cleared their debts with the HBC and established autonomous communities. In the Fort Edmonton region, the 1820s can be viewed as a point of emergence for Freeman communities as they gained greater autonomy from fur trade companies and increased the size of their families. Historical evidence is inherently fragmentary, and the HBC journals that provide the source base for studying the nineteenth century fur trade are no exception. What can be learned of the Freeman through these sources is mostly confined to their commercial relationship with the HBC. There are instances in the journals where the writer expresses more detailed assessments of the Freeman bands which grant a narrow perspective on the size, location, strength, and vulnerability of the bands. However, most conclusions that can be drawn of the Freeman in the 1820s, if not concerning their relationship with the HBC, are speculative. By tracing the varying experiences

³ Ibid.

of Freeman through this decade, this paper examines what it meant to go free in the early nineteenth century fur trade, including the successes, failures, and utility of Freeman, and the emergence of Freeman bands as a root of Métis ethnogenesis in the West.

The role of Freeman in the fur trade as a root of Métis ethnogenesis is a lightly tread historiographic area. Aside from works by Heather Devine, John E. Foster, Ted Binnema and Gerhard Ens, there is little literature that deals with Freeman in anything but a peripheral way. These scholars portray the Freeman as culturally, economically, and ethnically liminal groups who gradually gained independence and identity as the Plains Métis, yet struggled with HBC policies oriented towards minimizing their autonomy and bringing them closer to the HBC's sphere of influence following the 1821 merger with the NWC. Heather Devine argues that Freeman in the Swan Lakes and Red River region, especially the Desjarlais family, declined in part because of post-merger HBC systematization practices. She argues that the HBC developed policies targeted towards "individuals and groups identified as 'Freemen,' 'half-breed,' or 'Indian,' intended to undermine their power, influence and autonomy by restricting access to essential goods and services." She argues that the HBC viewed Canadien Freeman and their mixed-ethnicity descendants as "anachronisms, holdovers from the defunct French empire which had been supplanted by Anglo-Scots in the North and Anglo-Americans to the south." The HBC did not want to allow Freeman to hold their position sustaining ties between Indigenous groups and their trade, or allow them into European settlements. "In doing so," she argues, "the HBC inaugurated a lengthy tradition of corporate and government ascription of aboriginal identity, and indigenous resistance to the same."⁴ Although the policies Devine describes may have been prominent in the Swan Lakes and Red River regions in the 1820s, the Edmonton House journals show that although many Freeman left after the merger, those who stayed became increasingly important to the post as hunters, trappers, and agents throughout the 1820s. Further, although the Freeman were primarily

⁴ Heather Devine, "Les Desjarlais: The Development and Dispersion of a Proto-Métis Hunting Band, 1785-1870," p. 129-158, in Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens & R.C. MacLeod, eds., *From Rupert's Land to Canada: Essays in Honour of John E. Foster* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), 151.

Canadiens, Orkney men also went free, and Freeman communities were more diverse than current scholarship suggests. The Freeman were a disparate social category that consisted of a broad assortment of people of varying ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic relationships with the HBC. An important feature of Freeman groups was the importance of Indigenous women. As Sylvia Van Kirk argues in her ground-breaking book *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870*, the fur trade was not just a commodity trade network, it was a social and cultural complex that evolved continuously over two centuries.⁵ Relationships between fur traders and Indigenous women created trade alliances with the woman's Indigenous family and the fur company. Van Kirk argues that while in many other colonial spaces relationships between European men and Indigenous women were strictly prohibited, in the Western fur trade, relationships served as the mortar that connected the economic bricks of the fur trade. Alongside creating important trade networks, Freeman families emerged as distinct socio-cultural groups that became a point of origin point for some Western Plains Métis.

Emergence of the freemen

The Freeman were servants of European fur companies who upon completion of their contracts opted to remain in the frontier regions in which they trapped as independent trappers and traders rather than renew their contracts or return to central regions or areas from which they originated. Heather Devine traces the emergence of the Freeman to Canadian fur traders from the 1740s to 1760s in the Great Lakes region. These Canadiens (French-Canadian descendants of seventeenth century colonists), she writes, opted to direct "their efforts towards establishing their autonomy as freemen - independent traders living outside the control of trading companies."⁶ Although not exclusively Canadien, Freeman were rarely of British ethnicity. John Foster maintains that they were primarily a phenomenon of the Montreal-based fur trade and its *en drouine* (itinerant peddling) system of trade, and were therefore mostly of Canadien or eastern Indigenous

⁵ Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1980).

⁶ Devine, "Les Desjarlais," 131.

ethnicity, such as Iroquois or Ojibwa.⁷ The opportunity to go free was not practical for many engagés (men employed under contract with fur companies). Foster maintains that most lacked “the technical and sociopolitical skills necessary for survival.” “Not only would a Freeman have to know how to hunt, fish and trap successfully while living apart from the fort and the Indian band,” he writes, “but he would require the sociopolitical skills necessary to have the surrounding band view him as one of themselves in so far as the resources of the region were concerned.”⁸ Going free in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century fur trade was a relatively uncommon and difficult path for fur traders.

The initial process of becoming a Freeman was inadvertently encouraged by trading companies that promoted the *en drouine* tradition and encouraged wintering (spending the winter with an Indigenous group) to save on labour costs. Foster argues that becoming a Freeman was a three step process that involved marrying an indigenous woman, and establishing trading relationships with men in her band, while maintaining relationships with European traders.⁹ To be accepted, Devine writes, an outsider “would be required to demonstrate that he had personal qualities complementary to, but not supplanting, those already possessed by existing male members of a band before he would be permitted to marry one of their women.”¹⁰ Beyond the bands into which the Freeman would marry, they also needed positive relationships with other Indigenous peoples in the region.¹¹ To establish and maintain these relationships, the Freeman needed to know the languages of the groups with which they needed to associate. The Freeman needed to mobilize their intercultural diplomacy through these relationships to dominate the fur trade in the areas in which they lived. Freeman needed to control the fur trade, writes Devine, in order to “maintain their independence, enhance their status, and ensure the physical

⁷ John E. Foster, “Wintering, the Outsider Adult Male and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis,” p. 179-182, in Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens & R.C. MacLeod, eds., *From Rupert’s Land to Canada: Essays in Honour of John E. Foster* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), 180.

⁸ Foster, “Wintering, the Outsider Adult Male and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis,” 187.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁰ Devine, “Les Desjarlais: The Development and Dispersion of a Proto-Métis Hunting Band, 1785-1870,” 132

¹¹ Foster, “Wintering, the Outsider Adult Male and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis,” 180.

and social well-being of their families.”¹² Devine suggests that “Freemen bands functioned best when they could maintain familial relations with adjacent Indian bands and with personnel at Euro-Canadian trading companies simultaneously.” This was most effectively accomplished when individual family members “contracted marriages *a la façon du pays* (according to the custom of the country), secured employment in trading posts, and wintered with Indian bands.”¹³ While the trading companies did not always appreciate the economic autonomy of the Freemen, they were enticed by their linguistic skills and cultural capital, which allowed them to market themselves as cultural brokers who could cultivate trade relationships between fur trading companies and Indigenous peoples.

In the Saskatchewan River Valley and Edmonton House regions, like traders in the East, some servants would stay in the West instead of returning home following the completion of their contracts.¹⁴ The Edmonton House fur trade journals first mention Freemen in the early 1790s. Peter Fiddler mentions Freemen families near the Battle River in 1793, and William Tomison and James Bird regularly mention “free Canadians” coming to trade at Edmonton House from 1798-1800. Gerhard Ens and Ted Binnema argue that for Freemen, “kinship ties with the Cree and cordial relations with the Blackfoot at that time made it possible for them to live and hunt in the area from Lac La Biche and Lesser Slave Lake to the Rocky Mountains and, for the most part, they took their trade to all companies.”¹⁵ In the early 1800s however, the Northwest Company secured a substantially greater share of Freeman trading activity than the HBC.¹⁶ The NWC’s advantage in the early 1800s was largely attributable to the import of Iroquois, Ojibwa and Nipissing peoples to trap around Edmonton House, Fort Augustus and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. In 1801 the NWC and the XY company brought in over 300

¹² Devine, “Les Desjarlais: The Development and Dispersion of a Proto-Métis Hunting Band, 1785-1870,” 150.

¹³ Devine, “Les Desjarlais,” 150.

¹⁴ Ted Binnema and Gerhard J. Ens, eds., *The Hudson’s Bay Company: Edmonton House Journals, Correspondence and Reports, 1806-1821* (Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta, 2012), 42. and R. F. Beal, J. E. Foster, Louise Zuk, “The Métis Hivernement Settlement at Buffalo Lake, 1872-1877: A Historical Report prepared for the Department of Culture, Alberta Government: Historic Sites and Provincial Museum Divisions,” (April, 1987), 63.

¹⁵ Binnema and Ens, *The Hudson’s Bay Company: Edmonton House Journals, Correspondence and Reports, 1806-1821*, 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

eastern Indigenous trappers on three year terms, following the termination of which they mostly went free. Their initial trapping allegiances were to the NWC, and the increase in fur production significantly undermined HBC profits. Some of them intermarried with Canadian Freeman, others with Cree. They became exceptional trappers and hunters. Binnema and Ens write that “By 1803 James Bird noted that the HBC’s failure to compete in the Freeman trade seriously undermined their returns.” The Freeman were seen as more “motivated than Indians,” they write, as the Freeman, “numbering in the hundreds, wintered in the best beaver grounds, hunted the beaver assiduously, and were captive to the NWC traders.”¹⁷ The HBC traders were unable to attract the Freeman trade because they could not offer cash for furs. In 1808 however, James Bird offered to pay bills on his own account to draw Freeman business. By the mid-1810s, by way of cash for fur offers and the availability of discounted trade goods, the HBC was gradually able to thwart the dominance of the NWC and gain control of the Freeman trade.¹⁸ Through the 1810s Freeman bands became increasingly independent, taking debt with both companies, and trading with Indigenous groups. They became intermediaries between hunting and trapping bands and European trading companies. HBC traders such as Francis Heron viewed Freeman independence as evidence of weak allegiance and a practice that had to be curbed.¹⁹

Around the time of the merger, District Master at Edmonton, Francis Heron, assessed efforts to attract the Freeman trade. Describing the NWC fur procurement for 1820-21 he wrote, “I think they have procured about fifteen hundred Beaver skins and three thousand martens, besides other furs in proportion; a great portion of which their old servants, whom they employ as trappers.” Though they were “commonly denominated as ‘Freemen,’” he continued, they were “in fact in a state of the greatest slavery.” He stated that Edmonton Traders had been striving to liberate them, that “notwithstanding I have used every means in my power to make them independent of their oppressors, yet they are so deluded by the intrigues of the North West Company, and dread their vengeance so much that I have met

¹⁷ Binnema and Ens, *The Hudson’s Bay Company: Edmonton House Journals, Correspondence and Reports, 1806-1821*, 43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

with little success.”²⁰ While it is unclear whether Heron was describing a serious condition of oppression, or if he was invoking slavery and the value of Freeman trappers to justify to his superiors the lengths to which Edmonton House was going to attract the Freeman trade, it nonetheless indicates the significant value of Freeman to the western fur trade at the outset of the 1820s.

In contrast to the 1821-1822 Edmonton House Journal, Heron’s description of NWC Freeman suggests that there were many Freeman who had a variety of differing relationships with Fort Edmonton. Some Freeman had very close relationships with the Fort not only as hunters and trappers but as agents who could move fluidly between the trading companies and Indigenous groups. Louison Allary, makes regular appearances in the 1821-22 journal, at times bringing fur and food to the fort, at others taking debt and provisions. But in mid-July 1821 Anthony Feistel describes how Fort Edmonton used Allary to spy on a group of Cree traders: “The 6 Crees, that came here on the 2nd Instant, went away on the 14th; sent Louison Allary after them in order to discover what route they have taken, and in case they may lurk about this place, for seizing an opportunity, to thief some of our horses.”²¹ Throughout the 1821-22 journal, the Freeman are portrayed as more reliable than their Indigenous counterparts, culturally closer to the trade and more focused on procuring food and furs, taking debt, and remaining within the HBC’s sphere of influence. In early January 1822, Feistel described sending a servant named Jacques Bergere (Berger) who had gone free in the fall of 1821 to hunt buffalo for Edmonton House, Berger “arrived with the intention, of going to hunt Buffaloe for us, as we are anxious, to have a number of these animals killed as quickly as possible; fearing, that the different tribes of Indians, who are daily in search of them, and chasing them, from one part of the Country to the other, will drive them, out of our reach.”²²

By 1822, the journals show that the HBC had a secure hold on the Freeman market, although its traders were still concerned with keeping the Freeman trade.

²⁰ Francis Heron, HBCA, B.60/e/4, Edmonton District Report, 1820-21.

²¹ Anthony Feistel, 14 July 1821, HBCA, B.60/a/20, Journal of Occurrences Kept at Edmonton House, 1821-22, p.7.

²² Anthony Feistel, 11 January 1822, HBCA, B.60/a/20, Journal of Occurrences Kept at Edmonton House, 1821-22, p.25.

Chief Factor Colin Robertson reported in 1823 that there were fourteen Freeman trading with Edmonton House in the 1822/23 season, ten of whom held debts with the post. Although the number of Freeman reported is only fourteen, this number represents men able to bear arms, and the actual number of people in Freeman bands, including women and children, was much greater. There are eight other Freeman mentioned in the journals who are not mentioned in the account books, which seems to indicate that there were different categorizations within the Freeman. It seems that there were Fort Freeman, who operated closely within the sphere of influence of the HBC often as recent servants and others who had long standing relationships with the company, and peripheral Freeman such as the Canadien Musqua who were more mobile and associated less frequently with Fort Edmonton. Meanwhile, there were also Fort hunters, such as Amable Delorme who worked with the Freeman in securing food and fur. Colin Robertson also mentioned that a Freeman band deserted the Saskatchewan Region for the Columbia with 550 beaver pelts that would have gone to the HBC. In conjunction with departures of Freeman for Red River, desertion for the Columbia trade contributed to lowering the Freeman population for the Edmonton House region.²³

Food and fur

The 1822/23 journals portray a vibrant Freeman Trade, with Freeman including Musqua, Briere, Jean Baptise Brunais, Baptiste D'eau and many others trading beaver, fish, deer and buffalo with Fort Edmonton. The HBC journalists described the Freeman as exceptional hunters. Almost every page of the Edmonton House journals in the 1820s, mentioned one Freeman or another delivering food or fur, and that their work was indispensable. Nonetheless, there are several outstanding examples of the bounty of some of these hunts. In October 1823 Picard arrived with his family with "55 Large and Small Beavers, all of which he had killed in the Sturgeon & painted Creek." Duncan Finlayson recorded that "If all our Freeman were such good Hunters & so industrious as this man, we might expect

²³ Colin Robertson, 20 July 1823, HBCA, B-60-e-5 Edmonton District Report 1822-23, HBCA, B.60/d/12, Fort Edmonton Accounts, 1822-23, and Richard Grant, HBCA, B.60/a/21, Edmonton House Journal, 1822-23.

something handsome from them during the Winter.”²⁴ In June 1827 John Rowand wrote that they were “agreeably advertised [of] the arrival of Welsh with the meat of three Moose two Killed by Le Blanc and one by Picard occurring in a very seasonable time having nothing to issue rations to the people.”²⁵ In January 1828, John Rowand wrote that Baptiste La Framboise, an extremely prolific hunter and trapper who was the head of a large family and one of the most closely associated Freeman to Fort Edmonton, had with his brother Le Blanc (Joseph La Framboise) killed “twenty seven fat Buff cows and that [Amable] Delorme who went with him has collected all the meat and is on his return hither with part.”²⁶ A week later Delorme brought in another “1400 lbs Prime meat” from Le Blanc’s tent, and he was ordered “not to kill any more animals.”²⁷

Going free was not easy for all who chose to do so. For John Ward and his family, it was especially difficult. Ward was a man from Hoy, Orkney who worked as a bowsman and labourer for the HBC before deserting in 1796.²⁸ In the 1820s he was associated with Fort Edmonton as a trapper and as a horse minder. He had several children with an Indigenous woman including his son, John Ward Jr., an industrious Freeman who moved between the Fort and being free. Grant reported in November 1822 that John Ward Sr. was “finding times rather hard in the way of living, and he being no Moose or Red Deer Hunter, is come with his wife to the Fort, to claim our assistance in the way of provisions.”²⁹ In January 1824, Duncan Finlayson recorded that the Ward family was struggling, “It appears that these Freeman - none of them being good Animal hunters fare poorly and expect to get some assistance form us in the provision Way.”³⁰ Later in February, Finlayson gave further supplies to the Ward family and wrote that “A Freeman such as this old man, who is not active enough, and a good hunter for Strong Wood Animals, must inevitably feel the effects of Starvation about this season of the year, as no other

²⁴ Duncan Finlayson, 24 October 1823, HBCA, B.60/a/22, Edmonton House Journal, 1823-24, 15.

²⁵ John Rowand, 19 June 1827, HBCA, B. 60/a/25, Edmonton House Journal, 1827-28, 218.

²⁶ John Rowand, 31 January 1828, HBCA, B. 60/a/25, Edmonton House Journal, 1827-28, 256.

²⁷ John Rowand, 4 February 1828, HBCA, B. 60/a/25, Edmonton House Journal, 1827-28, 262.

²⁸ Binnema and Ens, *The Hudson's Bay Company: Edmonton House Journals, Correspondence and Reports, 1806-1821, 290-291.*

²⁹ Richard Grant, 12 November 1822, HBCA, B.60/a/21, Edmonton House Journal, 1822-23, p. 8.

³⁰ Duncan Finlayson, 12 January 1824, HBCA, B.60/a/22, Edmonton House Journal, 1823-24, 24.

kind of subsistence can easily be procured.”³¹ Throughout the 1820s, the Ward family was closer to the Fort than many of the other Freeman bands. They would contract labour to the fort, caring for the fort Horses during winter months. Although John Ward struggled as a Freeman, his sons seem to have gradually fared better as they were raised on the land and were decent hunters.

Between independence and loyalty

The best insight into Freeman bands and how the Freeman were regarded by Edmonton House traders is from Duncan Finlayson’s response in February 1824 to a request from Peace River and Athabasca house to send “a reinforcement of 6 half breeds who are good hunters and can speak French, in order to join the party intended for punishing the Perpetrators of the melancholy affair, which has taken place last Fall at Peace River.”³² Finlayson reported that there were no half breeds in the immediate employ of Fort Edmonton who could be spared and no Freeman could be tracked down in time for such a mission at such short notice. He wrote however, that aside from all logistical barriers to supplying these reinforcements, doing so would not be in the interest of the HBC’s balance of power in the Saskatchewan district. “Will it not by this means of giving them an idea of their own strength and what they are capable of performing when united together;” Finlayson asks, “that we cannot defend ourselves or fight our battles without their assistance, and perhaps raise at a future period, their views so high as to employ the same force against us; with which we wish them, to assist us.” His explanation reflects British colonialist thought, which warned against cultivating in potentially powerful and seditious Indigenous groups a self-awareness of power. “We by no means say that the Half breeds have so far degenerated as to arm themselves against us,” he continued, “but only suggest what might possibly happen.” Finlayson’s words suggest that the HBC’s relationship with the Freeman was very carefully managed. Nonetheless, Finlayson sent the Freeman Valle to inquire about the possibility of sending half breeds on the expedition.³³

³¹ Duncan Finlayson, 28 February 1824, HBCA, B.60/a/22, Edmonton House Journal, 1823-24, 44.

³² Duncan Finlayson, 7 March 1824, HBCA, B.60/a/22, Edmonton House Journal, 1823-24, 46.

³³ Duncan Finlayson, 8 March 1824, HBCA, B.60/a/22, Edmonton House Journal, 1823-24, 46.

Valle returned four days later, having found no half breeds other than Fort Hunters, and they were, Finlayson wrote, “not disposed to undergo toil, fatigue & perhaps dangers for a cause in which they are not concerned.” He noted however that “the large families they have got justify their refusals, as for instance two of them have no less than forty souls depending upon their exertions, and even the rest of those still attached to this Department may with equal correctness be calculated with regard to their families in the same proportion.” In this decade of journals this is the sole mention of the size of Freeman families in the early nineteenth century Saskatchewan district fur trade. While the number of families in the Edmonton House region had decreased after the HBC-NWC merger, those that remained continued to grow, and were culturally differentiated from both the European fur trade and Indigenous Bands. Finlayson wrote that many of the Freeman families had left for Red River and the Columbia River, and that those in the Edmonton House region had dispersed more widely.³⁴ Yet these families grew, and as they occupied both European and Indigenous socio-cultural and economic worlds, these 1820s Freeman families may be a root of ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis.³⁵

Finlayson was concerned about the fate of any half-breeds sent on the expedition in light of the size of families they maintained. He worried that they would not be able to support themselves with the loss of the primary male hunter, and that the responsibility may thus fall to Fort Edmonton, but that “to fulfill towards them all the duties, and procure for them all the relief, they could have expected from those whose loss they might have reason to deplore; to do this is utterly impossible from the number of souls as already mentioned attached to each of these Half breeds.” Finlayson emphasized the strategic importance of an intact population of loyal Freeman families in the Edmonton house region, that “from the number of people we have to deal with, and surrounded as we are by turbulent and hostile tribes, a person would naturally suppose, that we have more need of assistance to keep on a good footing with them; than to send a reinforcement to

³⁴ Duncan Finlayson, 11 March 1824, HBCA, B.60/a/22, Edmonton House Journal, 1823-24, 47, and on the move to Red River, Richard Grant, 9 May 1823, HBCA, B.60/a/21, Edmonton House Journal, 1822-23, p. 34.

³⁵ Foster, “Wintering, the Outsider Adult Male and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis.”

other places.” Thus, although the Freeman population had significantly diminished after the merger, those who stayed had growing families, and were important to Edmonton House and the HBC. As useful as they were in their liminal position between European traders and Indigenous bands, they remained at once a strength and a vulnerability that could not be over-empowered or over-exploited. Their value as a buttress to Fort Edmonton was contingent on a relationship balanced between loyalty and independence.

Fort agents

While Fort Edmonton benefited from the hunting, trapping and cultural brokerage of Freeman, the use of the Freeman as agents or as some form of military contractors was measured against an overarching fear of Freeman mutiny that could be impelled by the Freeman gaining a self-awareness of their potential military capacity. Aside from Finlayson’s objection to using the Freeman in explicit military expeditions, they served many purposes as agents of the post. One example is Louison Allarie; he was sent on a debt collection mission in November 1822 with fort employees Nicholas Monique and Jamac to visit the Isle a la Crosse people who had settled at Cold Lake to try to intercept the “Indian Band from Dog Rump Creek,” who “had heavy debts in this Department for several Years Past, and may Probably visit that quarter at the same time we submit the Names and amounts due by those who we think may go there.”³⁶ Fort Edmonton also at times would send parties of Freeman and Indigenous people together, as in 1827 when they sent Sinnum along with six other Crees to the Kootenais region to establish friendships and trade relationships.³⁷

It is unclear to what extent Finlayson’s fears of half breed loyalty were accurate, or shared by other Edmonton House traders. Some examples suggest that many Freeman were loyal to the HBC and did not always have good relationships with Indigenous groups other than those into which they married. There are three recorded instances of Freeman having their horses stolen by Indigenous peoples, in the 1820s most often by the Blackfoot. The first occurs in April 1824 when Gabriel

³⁶ Richard Grant, 12 November 1822, HBCA, B.60/a/21, Edmonton House Journal, 1822-23, p. 8.

³⁷ John Rowand, 1 October 1827, HBCA, B. 60/a/25, Edmonton House Journal, 1827-28, p. 237.

and Sacastre Dumont had two of their horses stolen by the Blackfoot, responding the following night by stealing four of their horses in return.³⁸ In April 1826 Baptiste Prinoe, Le Blanc and their families reported that Baptiste Prinoe Senior had shot dead a Slave man caught stealing one of their horses. They also mention that Baptiste D'eau, "who has a large family & in Debts, lost all his horses." John Rowand records that the incident "will Cause some trouble to the Establishment."³⁹ In September 1826, Musqua came to Fort Edmonton to "seek the loan of a horse having been plundered of all his horses by some Indians at present unknown."⁴⁰ And in March 1828, on the first day of his return journey from Rocky Mountain House, Nabaise Dumond had all of his horses stolen by the Blackfoot.⁴¹ In October 1826, during a battle between the Fort and a band of "Stone Indians," a Fort hunter named Sennum (Sinnem) willingly took up arms, and while chasing them out of the Fort was mistaken for the enemy and shot through the shoulder. Chief Factor Richard Grant recorded with gratitude for Sennum's bravery but apprehension of other half breeds, that if faced with "similar circumstances of the past few days and weeks very few of the half Breeds and Crees attached to this place but would volunteer their assistance to defend the Fort and prevent any wanton insult." In response to Sennum's gesture and subsequent injury, the Fort supported his family inside the walls of the Fort during his recovery."⁴² While it is impossible to draw concrete conclusions about Freeman loyalty from these accounts, especially as the various Freeman had many different relationships with the HBC and with surrounding Indigenous bands, it seems that there was a degree of animosity between the Freeman and some Indigenous bands, and that the Freeman may have been more loyal to the HBC than traders such as Duncan Finlayson perceived.

³⁸ Duncan Finlayson, 18-19 April 1824, HBCA, B.60/a/22, Edmonton House Journal, 1823-24, p. 57.

³⁹ John Rowand, 18 April 1826, HBCA, B. 60/a/23, Edmonton House Journal, 1825-1826, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Richard Grant and John Rowand, 7 September 1826, HBCA, B. 60/a/24, Edmonton House Journal, 1826/27, p. 2.

⁴¹ John Rowand, 10 March 1828 HBCA, B.60/a/25 Edmonton House Saskatchewan Journal, 1827-28, p. 273.

⁴² Although it seems that Sennum was fully Indigenous and not mixed race, and it is not clear whether he had previously worked for the Fort or where he was from, he nonetheless seems to have been closely involved with the Fort and may have been a Freeman. Richard Grant and John Rowand, 9-18 September 1826, HBCA, B. 60/a/24, Edmonton House Journal, 1826/27, p. 9-11.

Deserters

Throughout the 1820s, a risk for Fort Edmonton was Freeman desertion to American trading companies. It often occurred when the HBC sent Freeman near American territory on trapping missions. The first report came in September 1825, when several Freeman on a trapping expedition to the Missouri River deserted to join the Americans.⁴³ Another such defector was Jacques Bergere, who went free in the fall of 1821 and was one of the Fort's more closely associated Freeman, serving as a hunter and trapper until 1827. In the fall of 1827, while on a trapping and trade mission to Rocky Mountain House, Bergere, Rowand wrote, "one of our indebted freemen has absconded and joined them with all the goods and Traps advance him by Mr. Fisher." Rowand recorded that the Peigans had reported that "those Americans used their utmost endeavours to depreciate the characters of the Traders and render them despicable as virulent language and low expressions can impress."⁴⁴ Defection was problematic for Edmonton House not just because it called into question the loyalty of the Freeman, but because it represented material loss. Deserters such as Bergere were often heavily in debt to the company, and also took with them future hunting and trapping services which the Fort so highly valued.

By 1827, the Freeman had made a significant impact on the Edmonton House fur trade and were highly regarded by the Chief Traders. At the end of December, Le Blanc delivered 1008 rats, twenty-seven beaver, three marten, one red fox, and his brother Baptiste La Framboise arrived the following day with 1030 rats, nine mink and twenty-one beaver.⁴⁵ Chief Factor John Rowand wrote that "a trifling present would be much better bestowed here than to a number of Indians who collectively bring no more than one such individual." He emphasized the value and skill of the Freeman as a group to be cultivated and motivated. "Encouragement must be given to freemen particularly in these parts," he wrote, "if not they will become as Indians and become as indolent & indifferent as such an equality would

⁴³ John Rowand, 19 September 1825, HBCA, B. 60/a/23, Edmonton House Journal, 1825-1826, p. 1.

⁴⁴ John Rowand, 29 November 1827 HBCA, B.60/a/25 Edmonton House Saskatchewan Journal, 1827-28, p. 250.

⁴⁵ John Rowand, 29 November 1827 HBCA, B.60/a/25 Edmonton House Saskatchewan Journal, 1827-28, p. 256.

likely produce and further, some of them would abscond the place, the country hereabout is sufficiently large to occupy both the Indian and freeman as fur hunter.” He continued noting the importance of making it attractive for Freeman to stay in the area to prevent them from departing for Red River, or deserting to American trade companies. “Even should we leave the hunt of Beaver entirely out of the question,” he wrote, “the field for them is wide a proof of which is the departure of a number of them two year since, for the Red River Settlement, and of last summer when two of them deserted to the Americans.” Rowand suggested that they generally worked to ensure a favourable atmosphere for Freeman traders, who appeared “perfectly well pleased not with the terms of trade or the quality and variety of articles brought in for them, so much with the humoursome and indisimulated conduct shewn them by Mr. R which tends in a great measure to prompt them to industry being aware that such is an effective means of drawing his attention upon them.”⁴⁶ Although Rowand attributes the appeal of trading with the Fort as the prime motive for Freeman industry, and this may have factored into impelling their efforts, it seems more likely that Freeman trappers were mostly working to support their growing families.

Conclusion

Tracing the relationship of Freeman to Edmonton House between 1821 and 1828 following the merger of the HBC and the NWC reveals that rather than imposing policies of systematization and regularization, which Heather Devine suggests the HBC used to try to marginalize and control the Freeman after the merger, the Freeman remained integral to the Saskatchewan district fur trade, and Edmonton House traders worked very hard to maintain the loyalty and regulate the subordination of Freeman who were closely associated with the fort. The Freeman were prolific hunters and trappers who at times delivered food when rations were depleted, and sometimes procured furs in greater quantities than Indigenous groups of greater size. They worked as agents for the Fort engaging in surveillance of Indigenous bands, and as scouts on expeditions to establish new trade relationships.

⁴⁶ John Rowand, 30 December 1827 HBCA, B.60/a/25 Edmonton House Saskatchewan Journal, 1827-28, p. 256.

However, this was all in the context of a large exodus of Freeman to Red River immediately following the merger, and in smaller numbers through the 1820s. Some Freeman also abandoned the HBC for the American companies on the Columbia River. It seems that the departures of the Freeman had a compound effect on the relationship between remaining Freeman and Edmonton House. First, it made that relationship more intimate. The value and importance of Freeman to Fort Edmonton after 1820 was due partly to their small numbers. Perhaps in Red River, and other plains regions, where there were many more Freeman, the HBC had less value for them and thus treated them with the animosity identified by Heather Devine. Second, the departure of Freeman made Edmonton House traders suspicious of the loyalty of those who remained, and it seems that Freeman often had tenuous relationships with Indigenous bands and were more loyal to the HBC than Edmonton House traders gave them credit for. Throughout this period there is evidence that Freeman families became more geographically autonomous and were growing substantially, with each Freeman supporting up to forty people by the mid-1820s. The value of Freeman to Fort Edmonton, based on their position as a socio-cultural and physical buffer between the European fur trade seems to have enhanced their autonomy and promoted the growth of their communities, suggesting that the 1820s were a turning point in the ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis.

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