

## Simon Fraser, Loyalist son and explorer of British Columbia



One the most famous explorers of British Columbia is the venerated Simon Fraser, UE, a descendant of Catholic Scottish nobles whose family proved their loyalty to the crown on three continents.

In the year 1773, Simon Fraser Sr. of Culbokie and his wife Isabel (Grant) of Duldreggen emigrated to America on the SS Pearl during the [Highland Clearances](#). They settled briefly in Albany County, New York, and Simon, their eighth and youngest child, was born in Mapleton on May 20, 1776, on the eve of the [American War of Independence](#).

Pressed by war, Simon Fraser Sr. and eldest son William enlisted in the King's service. The father was secretary in the [Indian Department](#). He was captured at the Battle of [Bennington](#), and imprisoned in an Albany jail where he subsequently died of poor conditions in January 1779.

*(Before his death a petition was sent for the liberation of Simon Fraser Sr. due to the sufferings of his widow, Isabel, and her numerous young family. On 30 July 1778 one John Patan wrote to The Commissioners for detecting and defeating Conspiracies in the State of New York that he and others were uneasy about this effort and asked that the family be driven off. The Commissioners responded that material witnesses against Simon Fraser be summoned to appear before the Grand Jury on 31st July, 1778. They were Daniel Halenbeck, William More, Jacobus Williams and others. To date, a copy of this petition has not been found and is believed to have perished in the New York State Library fire of 1911).*

Brother William was a lieutenant in Lt. Col. Francis Van Pfister's Loyal Volunteers in 1777, and after the Battle of Bennington, was mustered into Capt. Robert Leake's Independent Company and later absorbed into the 2nd Battalion King's Royal Regiment New York in November, 1881.

Simon Fraser's uncle and patron John Fraser was a Captain with the Fraser Highlanders, who served with General [James Wolfe](#) and married Marie-Claire, the daughter of Canadian [Seigneur Joseph Fleury Deschambault](#). His daughter Josette - Simon Fraser's cousin - married [Charles Etienne Chaussegros de Lery](#), the nephew of [Michel Chartier de LOTBINIÈRE, Marquis de LOTBINIÈRE](#), the First Marquis Chevalier and the only French Barony in Canada to be formally recognized by the British Crown. Her family's aristocratic roots run deep. de Lotbiniere's son, [Michel-Eustache-Gaspard-Alain Chartier de Lotbinière](#), was captured in Quebec during the American War of Independence, released in 1777,

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became a colonel and after his first wife died, married Mary Charlotte Munro, the daughter of the Honourable Captain [John Munro](#). Their grandson, Simon Fraser's third cousin, Sir [Henri-Gustave Joly de Lotbinière](#), was a lawyer, politician, Premier of Quebec and was appointed Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia in 1906.

Fraser's Scottish lineage is equally remarkable. The Frasers of [Culbokie](#) are descended from William Fraser of Guisachan, the second son of Thomas Fraser, Lord Lovat.

Simon Fraser's grandfather, William, was the 8th of Guisachan. Fraser's grandmother, Margaret MacDonnell of Glengarry, was an aficionado of the Gaelic language, and read her poems to her cousin's son, [Bishop Alexander MacDonnell](#), who later became the first Roman Catholic Bishop of Upper Canada. Margaret had at least 12 children, including the future judge John Fraser - Simon Fraser's patron - another who was a doctor, two who died in India, and two others who served with other European armies.

The male children from his mother's family, the Grants, were equally adventurous. Three of Isabel's brothers, Peter, Duncan and Donald, served with the [North West Company](#) in Canada. Another uncle had a less auspicious career. (Big) John Grant, called 'the robber' because he stole sheep to feed his family, was taken prisoner at the battle of Culloden where he fought as a member of [Prince Charles Edward Stuart's](#) Army. Sent to Barbados, he served 14 years as a slave in the sugar fields before returning to Scotland and eventually settling in Canada and was proven a Loyalist.

Simon Fraser Sr. married Catherine Macdonell (of Leak), daughter of Allan MacDonnell, a Captain in the 1st Battalion of the [King's Royal Regiment of New York](#). Her grandfather, John MacDonell, was a Lieutenant with General James Wolfe in the [78th Fraser Highlanders](#) during the [French-Indian War](#), and Captain of the [84th Royal Highlander Emigrants](#) during the American Revolutionary War. His sister-in-law Jane married the Hon. Alexander Grant, a Colonel with the North West Company.

After the untimely death of Simon Fraser's father, Isabel and her children fled to Canada in 1784 and petitioned for land near [Cornwall, Ontario](#). She received land grants for all of her children as children of a [United Empire Loyalist](#), and in 1792, with the help of his uncle, now a Judge with the Court of the Common Pleas in Montreal, Simon received his first posting with the North West Company.

Little is known about Fraser's first dozen years in the fur trading industry, and the fact there are at least four men with the same name involved in the North West Company makes it nearly impossible to differentiate them, until 1805, when our Simon Fraser was given the task of expanding the company's operations west of the Rocky Mountains in the territory traversed by [Sir Alexander Mackenzie](#).

That summer, Fraser followed in Mackenzie's footsteps by ascending the mountains on the Peace River where he built [Rocky Mountain Portage House \(now Hudson's Hope, BC\)](#). Once this task was complete, Fraser continued along the Parsnip River, discovered the Pack River and found Trout (McLeod) Lake, where he built the first permanent European settlement west of the Rockies in the land that is now Canada.

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The following year, 1806, he built the post that was to become [Fort St James](#) on Stuart Lake, and he named the land New Caledonia. He and his lieutenant [John Stuart](#) also established [Fort Fraser](#).

But the seclusion of the country was soon obvious. The salmon run was dismal that autumn and needed supplies never arrived from the east, causing a famine and deprivations for the small but determined crew of Scottish explorers, French voyageurs and their Native guides. In 1807 he established Fort George, the future city of [Prince George](#), and planned his trip down the raging waterway that he believed was the [Columbia River](#).



*Drawing by C.W. Jefferys showing Simon and his voyageurs in the Fraser Canyon during his journey to the tidewater in 1808.*

Against the advice of the [First Nations](#) local guides, who said the river was far too dangerous to attempt, Fraser and his party of 24 departed Ft. George in four canoes on May 28, 1808. A succession of falls and cascades forced them to often take dangerous [portages](#) over steep canyons. Water levels were constantly rising during the summer run-off, and one day, the river rose an astonishing eight feet.

At times, Fraser and his crew of adventurers put their faith in the hanging walkways, scaffolds and ladders that had been built by the local First Nations in the steepest parts of the [Fraser Canyon](#). Near Lillooet, the river was completely unnavigable, and Fraser abandoned his canoes to finish his journey on foot.

As he descended the mountains into the lush Fraser Valley, he found a giant lake populated with seals near a large round mountain - likely a description of Mount Baker. The lake that was later drained to help irrigate the farmlands.

Fraser encountered many different First Nations along his route and managed to keep relations cordial throughout - even if he had to commandeer a canoe in order to complete his journey to the sea. (He left two calico shirts behind as payment.)

On July 2, 1808, Fraser arrived at the river's mouth, where he gazed over the water towards the mountains of Vancouver Island in the distance, and realized that his perilous journey would never reach the open ocean.

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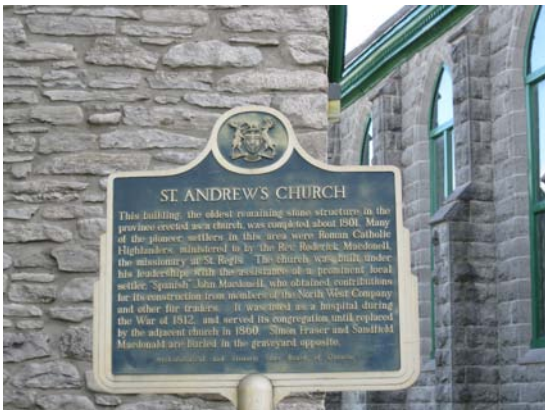
Here, in a village the Natives called [Musqueam](#), he found a massive 1,500x90-foot longhouse that was empty. The locals had fled at the news of his arrival, and would only re-appear, bearing a hostile manner, when he turned his commandeered canoe back upriver.

Fraser was further disappointed when he took a latitude reading and realized that this was not the hoped-for Columbia River, but some other less navigable route that was much further to the west and north.

His return journey to Fort George was accomplished in a remarkable 36 days.

After his explorations, Fraser returned to the North West Company., which gave him charge of the Mackenzie River Department. In 1816, he was arrested after political aspersions were cast against him surrounding the [Battle of Seven Oaks](#), one of the defining moments that shaped western Canada. The allegations cast a pall over his enthusiasm for adventure, and Fraser soon retired to his 240-acre farm at St. Andrews, West Canada (Ontario), where he farmed and operated mills.

Always loyal, Fraser later served as a Captain in the 1st Regiment of the Stormont militia during the [Upper Canada Rebellion](#) of 1837-38, at the age of 61 years, where he suffered a knee injury that would plague him for the rest of his life.



Simon Fraser and Catherine had five sons and three daughters who grew to maturity, and he died Aug. 18, 1862, one day before his wife. They are buried in a single grave in the Roman Catholic cemetery at St. Andrews West, Ont.

Some locals believe Simon and his wife starved to death.



All that remains of his farm are the remnants of his mill that lay under a mound of debris.

