

SIMON FRASER 1776-1862

Simon Fraser was born 1776 in Mapletown, Vermont and died Aug. 18, 1862, near Cornwall ON. He wrote that his exploration of the river that now bears his name brought him to places “where no human being should ever venture. Words can never describe our situation at times.”



Simon Fraser
Public Archives of British Columbia

The son of Scottish Highlanders, Fraser was a fur trader and explorer who charted much of British Columbia. In 1805, the Northwest Company commissioned Fraser to find a navigable trading route through the Rockies and establish settlements along the way. In 1807, Fraser founded modern-day Prince George, and in 1808 explored the river which now bears his name. In 1820, Fraser settled in the Cornwall area, and died there in 1862.

Part of that entry in Fraser’s diary might apply in a different sense to his childhood situation. His parents had emigrated to America and his father fought in the Battle of Bennington in what is now the State of Vermont. Simon was born in 1776, one year after the first shots were fired in the American Revolution. His parents Simon and Isabel (Grant) Fraser had emigrated from the Outer Hebrides, Scotland two years

earlier as they thought that America would provide better opportunities for their nine children. They settled in Albany New York in a hamlet called Mapleton in Hoosier Township in 1776 the same year that Simon was born. They sensed that a cousin Hugh, a resident of the area for several years was not popular in the community but they paid little attention as they felt secure. They worked hard on their farm and they were confident that it was prospering, but new boundaries were being established and they lost most of their land. Then war broke out. Simon’s father and his eldest brother joined the British forces. Simon, still a baby, never saw his father again. His mother’s life was difficult in the midst of neighbours and other relatives who would not speak to her because she was a Loyalist.

Simon’s father General Fraser (some books say Captain) was taken prisoner and sent to Albany Prison where he became ill. The family organized a petition for his release but it was disregarded. He died in prison when Simon was only three. His mother struggled on. The family had to pay a series of fines because Simon’s brother refused to join the Americans. The Fraser farm was raided. To make ends meet they sold some of their animals while others were confiscated. This was the tense life that Simon lived until the Revolution ended in 1783.

His older brother William was already in Canada. His second oldest brother followed to assess the situation there. The boy’s uncles, Judge John Fraser of Montreal offered help so Isabelle Fraser and her family undertook the long trek to Canada in 1784. They acquired land near Cornwall in what is now Ontario, and began clearing it for their new home. Isabelle believed in education and in 1790, when Simon was fourteen, sponsored by his uncle, he went to school in Montreal. Whenever he could he stole away to the Montreal waterfront where the aspects of the fur trade fascinated him.

A relative of his father's was involved in the industry and accepted the boy as an apprentice. For sixteen-year old Simon his dream was about to be realized. He received no favours and worked hard, learning the business from the ground up. Before long he was posted to Athabasca. There he continued clerking and learned the outdoor skills – paddling a canoe, snowshoeing, interpreting the weather and repairing equipment. The winters were hard but not like the terrible first winter the Loyalists spent in Canada. His leadership abilities were recognized and Simon Fraser set forth on his first venture. His explorations westward are well reported in numerous books. He died in 1862 and is buried near Cornwall, Ontario.

There is a saying “Nothing ventured, nothing gained”. From Simon Fraser's adventures, we as Canadians have gained much – in Loyalist, Canadian and Provincial history.

Source: Lois Dickinson UE, Chilliwack Branch

An Excellent Site: <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/explorers/h24-1640-e.html>



Simon Fraser Descends the Fraser River
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