

## York Boats, Scows and Sturgeon-Heads

York Boats, Scows and Sturgeon-Heads were three types of inland boats used by the Hudson's Bay Company, they were suited for both river and lake travel. All three were usually manned by Metis boatmen.



Scrip Commission boat leaving Fort McMurray to ascend the Athabasca River.  
Pierre Cyr<sup>1</sup> in the bow of the boat.

The Metis were essential in commercializing the fur trade with the invention of the York boat. In the early 1800s, the employees of William Sinclair, a Metis Chief Factor from York Factory, developed a new shallow-draught watercraft of Orcadian-Viking influenced design, the York Boat. The folk technology of these Metis men recreated the ancient Norse river boats. This sturdy watercraft was designed to carry heavier loads and last longer than the birch bark canoe. The York boat carried three tons of goods, about three times the capacity payload of the largest *canot du nord*. In addition, the York Boat could weather the heavy storms common to the large lakes that would keep the canoe brigades beached waiting for the weather to clear. York boats worked inland water routes such as the Mackenzie, Saskatchewan, Nelson, and Red Rivers.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Cyr (b. July 12, 1835, St. Boniface)<sup>1</sup> is famous as a voyageur with the Franklin Expedition as well as later working as a steersman for the Treaty 8 Metis Scrip Commission. In 1899, this commission travelled on the Athabasca and Peace Rivers in two scows and a York Boat. Cyr was steersman for the York Boat.

At the height of their use, there were more than 200 York boats, and over 1,200 men were employed on the York Boat brigades. The boats had a pointed bow and stern and carried both oars and square sails. The crew was made up of eight rowers plus a steersman and a bowsman. In 1823, the Council of the HBC Northern Department decreed that all new boats should have a minimum keel of 24 feet. Boats on the Saskatchewan River in 1858 had a keel length of 30 feet. The largest York Boats had an overall length of 42 feet, a beam of nine feet and a three-foot inside depth. The capacity of the boats depended on the design. At their largest they carried 120 pieces, at a weight of almost 100 pounds per piece. This gave the large boats a capacity of six tons. Chief Factor Inland, William Tomlinson, pointed out the advantage of these boats, "the crews of two York Boats, eighteen in number, have brought goods equal to forty men in canoes." These boats had a life span of three years or more, whereas, a birch freighter canoe would last for only one year.

A scow is a flat bottomed boat used to transport bulk freight. The Hudson's Bay Company employed many to transport trade goods and supplies in the Canadian Northwest. These vessels needed to be portaged around rapids or eased lightened through river rocks and white water. "Sturgeon-Heads" were specially built scows. They measured forty to fifty feet in length with a twelve-foot beam and could carry ten tons. The oars are twenty feet long. It took a strong man to handle the forty-foot steering-sweep which was mounted with an iron pivot on the stern.



Loading Hudson's Bay Company Scows. Date [ca. 1910]  
University of Saskatchewan Archives/Brock Silversides Database ID36770



Sturgeon-Head Scow.



Sturgeon-Head Scow



Rowing a York Boat



PAM (N22266)



PAM, York Boat (19)



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