

John Richards McKay. (1792-1877)

John was born at Albany Factory on August 10, 1792, the son of John McKay Sr., a Scottish fur trader and Mary Favel a Metis. He was educated in England before joining the HBC in 1808. He worked initially at Brandon House under his father then at Pembina River, and at Qu'Appelle House where he supervised its' reconstruction. James Sutherland has left a written report of this time in the Selkirk Papers:

In the fall of 1815, I sent John Richards McKay to the Qu'Appelle with 15 men and an assortment of goods, they arrived there sometime in the beginning of October, previous to their arrival all the houses they had occupied the preceding year were burnt to the ground and otherwise destroyed. This act was supposed to have been done by the servants of the NWCo., but no proof could ever be got to confirm this supposition (however)... the NWCo.'s interpreter named Murray, who had passed the summer there, informed McKay that he himself had cut down the stockades as they intercepted his view from the NW House.

Mr. McKay and his men immediately commenced building houses and erecting stockades on the old foundation. They got up a temporary store when Alexander McDonnell, partner of the NWC arrived with a great parade of 40 or 50 Canadians, Freemen and Half-Breeds forming two distinct companies. McDonnell led one of these consisting of Canadians with colours flying. The other company were Half-Breeds headed by Cuthbert Grant... this tribe had another flag hoisted... it is red with a figure 8 placed horizontally in the middle of it and is said to be present from the NWC along with some swords and a few pairs of pistols....

McDonnell sent a message to McKay telling him to desist from building as he was determined no house should be erected on that spot, it being in front of his fort. This threat had not the desired effect, Alexander Fraser a Half-Breed and clerk to the NWC, came to McKay and ordered him to depart from the place immediately with all his men and property, adding that the country round the Red River belonged to the Half-Breeds and they were determined none of the HBC's servants should remain on it as they only came to procure provisions for the support of the colony.

McKay gave evasive answers and said he could not remove, as he had neither carts nor horses to remove the property. Fraser replied that the carts and horses would be furnished by the NWC if they would remove off quietly. McKay then said he would not comply with such an order until he had consulted his men. Fraser on hearing this got in a violent passion and told McKay that he would give them that night to prepare themselves for the journey and that if they were not off early next morning he and his countrymen would kill every one of them and sweep the earth with their dead bodies and leave their carcasses for the wolves to eat.

...before the sun appeared a message was sent to McKay to know whether he intended to remove or not. All our men said they were determined to remain whatever might be the result. As soon as this was known to the NWC House, the Half-Breed flag

was hoisted, a great number of men assembled in arms before the gate of the NWC House, one of the colony's field pieces was put in the blockhouse, the other in the gates and both pointed at our people... by this time the sun had risen and objects became distinct, and the NWC people to their great disappointment observed that several Indians were intermixed among our people.

When A. McDonnell saw this, he thought it dangerous to commence hostilities, as it would be the means of bringing on an Indian war. He therefore sent for McKay to meet him between the houses, which he did. He then wished to make McKay promise that none of the provisions procured at that place would be given to the Colonizers. This McKay could not agree to. They however arranged matters so that our people were permitted to go on with their buildings until I arrived, then all differences were to be settled... This was the state of affairs as I found it on the 8th of December.

Sometime in 1816, at Brandon House John married Harriet Ballenden, the daughter of Chief Factor John Ballenden. They were married “according to the custom of the country” and later, on January 21, 1821 they were officially married by Reverend John West the Company’s chaplain. They had eleven children.

McKay subsequently worked at Fort Hebria in the Swan River district. John lost his job as a result of the 1821 amalgamation of the NWC and HBC, briefly opened a school at Red River, went back into the fur trade on the upper Missouri, then was rehired by HBC in 1831. He took charge of Fort Ellice in the summer of 1833 and was clerk then postmaster until 1843. His dismissal by the company in 1843 is somewhat of a mystery; however, he was rehired in 1846 as postmaster at Partridge Crop (Fairford), then from 1848 to 1854, he served at Shoal River. He retired in 1859. The Cree and Saulteaux of the Upper Red River and Swan River districts referred to McKay as *Ma-ak-gy-gan-naise* or “The Bear Skin,” a symbol of their respect for him. This nickname was handed down to his sons and grandsons. He was renowned for his skill with the sword and gun and was an excellent horseman. He reportedly had Indian boys shoot blunt arrows in his direction and he would practice deflecting them with his sword.



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