

Harriette Goldsmith Sinclair Cowan (1832-1926)

Harriette Sinclair was one of the English-Metis “First Ladies” of Upper Fort Garry and the Red River Settlement.

Harriet was born at the Red River Settlement on July 9, 1832, the English-Metis daughter of trader James Sinclair (b. 1805) and Elizabeth Maria Bird. Harriet’s mother was born circa 1811, the English-Metis daughter of Hudson’s Bay Company Chief Factor Curtis Bird and his Cree wife Oomenahowish also known as Elizabeth Montour. Harriet was educated at Mrs. Ingram’s school then at age 14 attended the Red River Academy. In 1848 James Sinclair took Harriette and her sister Maria to Galesburg, Illinois to attend Knox College. The girls returned to the Red River Settlement in 1850.

Harriet married Hudson’s Bay Company physician William Cowan 1852 and had four children: John Cowan (1853-1912), Anna Maria Cowan (1855-1932), Harriet Mary Cowan (1860-1944), and Alexander Cowan (dates unknown).

For a time Dr. Cowan practiced his profession at Fort Garry, then entered the service of the Hudson's Bay Company as surgeon and fur trader. In 1856 he was sent to take charge of Moose Factory on James Bay where he took his wife Harriet and the children. William Cowan arrived at Moose Factory in 1856 and became Chief Trader there in 1860. In 1862, he transferred back to Fort Garry to be second in command to Governor William McTavish. After the return from Moose Fort the Cowan family lived within the compound of Upper Fort Garry. In 1864 the couple made the return trip to England to leave their three oldest children there to be educated.

During the 1869 Metis Resistance, Dr. Cowan was in charge of the fort due to McTavish’s illness. He and his wife were both held captive by Louis Riel’s troops. In July 1870, Cowan left Red River with his family, via York Boat to Hudson’s Bay then by ship to England. On their return, Dr. Cowan settled on a farm south of St. Paul, Minnesota from 1870 to 1876 when they returned to Winnipeg.



Late in her life, Mrs. Cowan contributed her recollections of early life in the Red River Settlement for the book *Women of Red River* (W.J. Healy, 1923). She died at the Winnipeg home her son Alexander, at 727 Wardlaw Avenue, on September 7, 1926 as a result of a broken hip sustained in a fall a week earlier. She was buried in St. John’s Cemetery.

Scrip affidavit for Cowan, Henrietta; wife of D.W. Cowan; born: July 9, 1832; father: James Sinclair; mother: Maria Bird claim no.: 2859; scrip no.: 12290; date of issue: September 5, 1878; amount: \$160.

Scrip affidavit for Cowan, Harriet Mary; born: 11 January, 1860; father: William Cowan (White Settler); mother: Harriet Sinclair.

Scrip affidavit for Cowan, John; born: 6 August, 1853; father: William Cowan; mother: Harriet Sinclair.

Scrip affidavit for Cowan, Anna Maria; born: 10 September, 1855; father: William Cowan; mother: Harriet Sinclair.

Reference:

Hall, Norma. "Harriet Goldsmith Sinclair Cowan." At
<https://hallnjean2.wordpress.com/the-red-river-resistance/women-and-the-resistance/harriet-goldsmith-sinclair-cowan>



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