



Artwork by George Gingras

## Y is for York Boat

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For the first few hundred years of European settlement in Canada, boats were the main means of transportation. Roads were uncommon and most settlements were formed near or on rivers. The first traders used **canoes** to travel on Canada's large river systems in order to trade with **First Nations**. The First Nations invented canoes thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans. They were fast, and they were easy to repair. Although canoes were fast and easily moved on the water, the **Hudson's Bay Company** (HBC) wanted boats that could hold more cargo.

Two groups of HBC employees worked to build such boats: Scots-Métis and **Orcadians**. Many Métis families have Orcadian ancestry. Based on designs developed by Scandinavians living in the **Orkney Islands**, this boat, known as the "York Boat," was much bigger and sturdier than a canoe. It could haul more goods and furs on a single trip. These boats were able to carry up to 3,200 kilograms. Larger cargoes meant bigger profits. Most of the men who worked on York Boats were Métis.

York Boats sometimes caused problems for the fur traders. They needed to be rowed by twelve men in order to move. At times, the boat was too big for a river or stream. When this happened, it took a great deal of effort to carry, or **portage**, these large boats over land. Since these boats were so large, they were hard to repair, and they often wore out in a few years. These boats were used from about 1826 until the arrival of the steamboat in 1859.

### Other Resources:

Barkwell, Lawrence J., L. Dorion, and D. R. Préfontaine, eds. *Metis Legacy: A Metis Historiography and Annotated Bibliography*. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2001.

Barkwell, Lawrence J., L. Dorion, and A. Hourie. *Metis Legacy II: Michif Culture, Heritage, and Folkways*. Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2007.

*The Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture* ([www.metismuseum.ca](http://www.metismuseum.ca)).

