Free Trade in the Red River Region: Opposing Forces Collide
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Introduction:
In 1845, the Métis at Red River sent a petition to the Hudson's Bay Company Governor outlining a series of questions they wanted the Company to answer concerning their economic and legal rights. At the time, the HBC held a trade monopoly over Rupert's Land, awarded to them by the British Crown. The company believed that they had the right to control trade in the region and that the Métis men who traded with other companies were in violation of their monopoly. Among the signatories on this petition were two prominent free traders who contested the Company's monopoly, Peter Garrioch and James Sinclair. These men, both free traders but, from different economic backgrounds, united in the 1840's to fight for the rights of their people by challenging this monopoly. This project sought to understand how power is exercised by the Métis and the HBC, oppositional forces with competing claims over a region's economy. To do this, I looked at how Sinclair and Garrioch coped with constant economic pressure from the Company, shedding light on the larger struggles faced by the Métis people at the time.

Different Backgrounds:

Peter Garrioch:

• Educated in the United Kingdom, Garrioch was a teacher until the early 1840's.
• In 1843, he left Red River to work for the Missouri Fur Company.
• Operating a post along the Souris River, Garrioch traded with First Nations and Métis traders. Many of the references he makes in his journals indicate that he was just getting by. At the end of his journal, he decides that he would start a farm in order to make more money.
• Threatened multiple times by the Governor of Red River and Cuthbert Grant, Warden of the Prairies, that his goods would be seized for not paying duties when crossing the border. This would have had a large impact as Garrioch did not have the means to recover from a seizure.

James Sinclair:

• Educated in Scotland before returning to Rupert's Land in 1826. He then joined forces with a rich trader at Red River named Andrew McDermot and became wealthy and influential.
• Freight goods for the HBC before his contracts were cancelled in 1843. After, he provided goods for other traders, including Garrioch.
• Created a trade network to the Pembina trading post on the American side of the border.
• Acted as a guide for the HBC, leading a large contingent of Métis to the Oregon Territory for resettlement.
• Carried a petition to the government of the United Kingdom demanding that the HBC and its agents stop harassing Métis traders.

I would rather “rot in jail” than pay duties!
-Peter Garrioch protesting import duties on American goods (Gibson, 2015)

Methodology:
This project was inspired by a 19th century petition signed by James Sinclair and Peter Garrioch and was shaped by the personal journal of Peter Garrioch, both primary sources. I conducted research of primary source documentation from the HBC archives at Library and Archives Canada in order to find the exact documents signed by both men. I also used secondary sources, mainly books, written about this time period and general internet searches, using the individuals name followed by “Métis”, “Red River”, or “Fur Trade” to find biographical information on both men.

Conclusion:
By looking into the lives of Peter Garrioch and James Sinclair, this research was able to highlight how these men became community leaders at Red River. It also shows how everyday citizens fought for their rights as Métis people against the HBC. This project is important as it depicts how the struggle for Métis rights has been ongoing for almost 200 years, with much work still to be done.

References:

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