



Mapping the International Boundary between British Canada and the United States: the letters and maps of David Thompson, 1817-1827

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Abstract

David Thompson (1770-1857) was responsible for the early mapping of large areas of Canada and the Oregon territory from 1790-1812. Between 1817 and 1827 he worked as the lead surveyor for the British interests with the International Boundary Commission under the 6th and 7th Articles of the Treaty of Ghent. The Maine Historical Society has the British Commissioners' correspondence including 100 or so letters from David Thompson and the finished and sketch maps drawn by him, his son Samuel, and others assisting with the survey work. The letters describe much about the logistics and personnel of this boundary survey, and the maps cover the area from the western end of the St. Lawrence River, across lakes Ontario, Erie, Huron, Superior and westward to Lake of the Woods. Bringing these letters and maps to light is the intention of this presentation.

Introduction

David Thompson's prodigious body of work, humble beginnings, moral rectitude, respectful relations with the Native Americans, his frontier spirit and courageous qualities have earned him the respect and honor of being considered the greatest North American land geographer of his time. His 28 years of exploration adding up to 90,000 km. (35,000 mi.) of travel, mapping 3.9 million sq. km. (1.5 million sq. mi.) support this designation.

With the advent of the North American David Thompson Bicentennials initiative beginning in 2007 and the publication of two biographies and more publications to come, it is timely to address David Thompson's work on the International Boundary as learned from his own writings and maps. The 100 letters to and from Thompson and the 60 or so maps created under his direction and related to the International Boundary Survey between the years 1817 and 1827 which are held at the Maine Historical Society will be described here.

Three recent publications - Francis Carroll's [A Good and Wise Measure: The Search for the Canadian-American Boundary, 1783-1842](#), Jack Nisbet's [The Mapmaker's Eye: David Thompson on the Columbia Plateau](#), and D'arcy Jenish's [Epic Wanderer: David Thompson and the mapping of the Canadian west](#) all help to illustrate the story of Thompson's life and work.

David Thompson (1770-1857)

David Thompson was born in England in 1770 and enrolled in the Grey Coat School in London where he learned to read and write. He was hired to work for the Hudson's Bay Company as an apprentice clerk in 1783. A few years after beginning his work for the fur trade an accident resulting in a broken leg provided him an opportunity to learn surveying and the advanced use of astronomical instruments from Philip Turnor, the Hudson's Bay Company's inland surveyor.

During the years between 1790-1814 while working for three great fur trading companies: the Hudson's Bay Company, the Nor'westers, and the North West Company, he created surveys and maps while also engaged in trade with the Native Americans. In 1814 Thompson delivered his "Great Map" to the North West Company's William McGillivray showing a large section of northwestern Canada, never before mapped with such accuracy. He was the first European to find and map a land route across the continent to the Pacific Ocean via the Columbia River in 1808.

The International Boundary Commission for the 6th and 7th Articles of the Treaty of Ghent

While Thompson was exploring and mapping the Canadian west the British and American governments were preparing to determine the boundary between the two countries. The 6th and 7th Articles of the Treaty of Ghent addressed the boundary beginning at St. Regis, New York and Cornwall, Ontario along the St. Lawrence River and ending at the northwesternmost point of Lake of the Woods.

Work on the 6th and 7th Articles of the Treaty of Ghent was led by British Commissioners John Ogilvy and Anthony Barclay and American Commissioner Peter B. Porter. John Ogilvy died during his commission working on the survey. He contracted what is now thought to be malaria along the marshes bordering Lake St. Clair and died in September 1819. He was replaced by Anthony Barclay.

It was Thompson's extensive experience with surveying and mapmaking for the fur trading companies that caused him to be the natural choice as the Canadian/British surveyor for work in determining the international boundary. His experiences in the fur trade with managing bateaux, canoes, rough terrain, and survey work made him an invaluable resource for both the British and American teams. He worked for the entire tenure of that Commission 1818-1827, whereas the American surveyors changed almost yearly. The Americans were much younger and less experienced than Thompson who was 47 years old at the start of the survey work.

David Thompson was a prolific journal and letter writer. He kept daily journals, survey reports with astronomical readings, and a running correspondence with the commissioners. Thompson's

careful observation of the countries explored give researchers much material to study. David Thompson's son, Samuel, age 16, joined the survey team and his name first appears on the finished maps of Lake Huron, 1820 and on many of the finished maps westerly to Lake of the Woods.

Work along the survey line

Supplies and transportation were arranged in advance, sometimes a year in advance. Steamboats, canoes and bateaux were employed. Smaller vessels were sometimes built to order according to Thompson's specifications. The work and supplies for surveys along the St. Lawrence, Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, and Lake Huron were fairly straightforward, as provisions could be gotten at small towns and fur company posts nearby. Once the survey struck out past Lake Superior, the provisions had to be carried across long portages and last a full month or so. Usually the surveys would get underway in June or July and finish up in October. The ice would not 'break up' until June and the cold weather would close in again by October.

Written documentation was kept in the form of journals, diaries, and letters giving status reports on the work. Letters to and from the surveyors and commissioners dealt with supplies, transportation and logistical matters. Also, logs were kept with the astronomical observations. Sketch maps were generated, and, in Thompson's case, Native Americans were consulted and their observations of the terrain, waterways and routes sketched. Of particular note here is a map drawn by Chief Wasp of the Vermillion Lake region in western Ontario.

After the surveys were completed for the year, the surveyors would retire to more comfortable surroundings and produce their finished maps based on the sketches, astronomical observations, logs and journal entries. Then, maps in hand, the Commissioners would meet and agree, or not, about the line of the boundary. Sometimes, surveys would have to be repeated.

Maine Historical Society

The British Commissioners' papers and a copy of John Ogilvy's letterbooks are held at the Maine Historical Society including those papers related to the boundary between the United States and Canada from the Atlantic Ocean westward to Lake of the Woods. This paper will focus on the 100 letters and 60 or so maps related to the Great Lakes boundary work done by David Thompson.

Seven years ago, I was cataloging the maps in the Maine Historical Society's Northeast Boundary Collection, more formally called the Barclay Collection (Coll. 26). These materials include the records of the British Commissioner for the Northeast Boundary; that line running between Maine and Canada. Within this collection are maps of the Great Lakes. These maps caught my eye because of their noteworthy execution and also because they were of a geographic area not normally covered by the Society's collecting policy. The mapmaker was David Thompson, and I was curious enough about him and these maps to search for more information. Much to my surprise an entire website and initiative was starting up entitled the North American David Thompson Bicentennials centered around a man about which I had never heard up until this time.

The website lists all activities taken up during these next few years that reflect upon Thompson's life and explorations and that group of activities surrounding the North American fur trade. Hundreds of educators, researchers, artists, museums, archives, publishers, speakers, authors, guides, mapmakers, national park employees, canoeists, and re-enactors have taken up this initiative and are producing works. Both the Thomas Fisher Special Collections Library at the University of Toronto and the Archives of Ontario created exhibitions about Thompson.

The books and exhibits related to Thompson's life are rich in information about his years as a fur trader, but sparse in the years of the Boundary Commission work. The Archives of Ontario website states, "*Correspondence is sparse and concentrates almost exclusively on boundary issues with the United States in the 1830's.*"

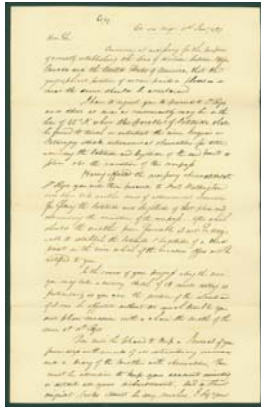
The maps and letters

The excitement generated by all this enthusiastic activity about Thompson encouraged me to bring to light the maps and letters held at the Maine Historical Society. Each letter has been digitized at a 40 MB resolution and saved as a tif and jpg file. Full transcriptions are underway leaving the misspellings and punctuation as they are. Each transcription follows the original letters line by line. The transcriptions are shared by means of the North American David Thompson Bicentennial website. Three volumes of David Thompson's writings are in the process of publication through the University of Toronto Press. It is possible that some of these letters might be included in one of these volumes. And finally, the digitized images will be lined up alongside the transcriptions and made into PDF files, and put online through one of the Maine Historical Society's websites.

Below is a modern map of the countries explored showing the Great Lakes taken from the website Graphic Maps.com. The Great Carrying Place or Pigeon River waterway and Lake of the Woods not shown here, are located to the north and west of this map.



British Commissioner John Ogilvy wrote to David Thompson on January 18, 1817 with detailed instructions:



Dear Sir,

Conceiving it necessary for the purpose of correctly establishing the line of division between Upper Canada and the United States of America, that the geographical position of certain points or places on or near the same should be ascertained.

I have to request you to proceed to St. Regis and there as near as conveniently may be on the line of 45° N. where this parallel of latitude shall be found to touch or intersect the river Iroquois or Cataragy make astronomical observations for determining the latitude and longitude of the said point or place also the variation of the compass.

Having effected the necessary observations at St. Regis you will then proceed to Fort Wellington and there take another series of astronomical observations for fixing the latitude and longitude of that place and determining the variation of the compass. - After which should the weather prove favorable it will be desirable to establish the latitude & longitude of a third point on the river which if the occasion offers will be notified to you.

In the course of your progress along the river you may take a cursory sketch of its course noting as particularly as you can the position of the islands and if it can be effected without too much trouble you will please measure with a chain the width of the river at St. Regis

You will be pleased to keep a journal of your proceedings with remarks of all extraordinary occurrences and a diary of the weather with observations, You must be attentive to keep your accounts minutive in detail all your disbursements, And as the original books must be any vouchers. I beg you to keep the whole in a neat and orderly manner

I leave to you the choice of the person you may require as an Assistant in the present business and having the fullest confidence in your discretion and diligence, I authorize you to make all the requisite arrangements for accomplishing the above objects.

Should the state of the river be such as to make it more convenient to commence your operations at Fort Wellington than at St. Regis you will exercise your judgment on that point.

Your draft on me at Messrs. J & D.P. Ross's for the amount of your disbursements will be paid.

I am dear sir

Your &c

(signed) John Ogilvy

Thompson and his team proceeded to map all the islands in the area now known as Thousand Islands in the St. Lawrence River, including Cornwall Island.



Coll. 26, Map FF 15

In 1819 the survey teams prepared to move into Lake Ontario and the waterways connecting Lake Erie. The American Commissioner strongly cautioned against surveying in the marshes along the St. Clair River. The teams worked there nevertheless and both parties succumbed to grave illness and had to be rescued. Sadly, British Commissioner Ogilvy, who was accompanying the survey team, died from this illness which may have been malaria.

The two maps below show Lake St. Clair. The teams had to return at a later date in cooler months to finish the survey around these marshes.



Sketch and finished maps of
Lake St. Clair

Coll. 26, Map FF 29

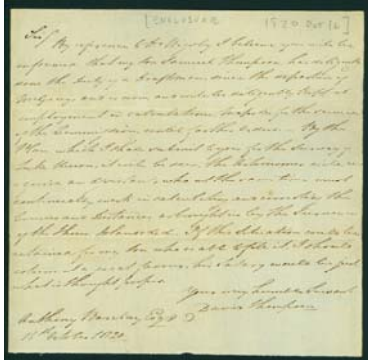


Coll. 26, Map F10 (detail)

1820 found the surveyors in Lake Huron, and David Thompson's son, Samuel's name begins to appear on the beautiful finished maps of the Lake.

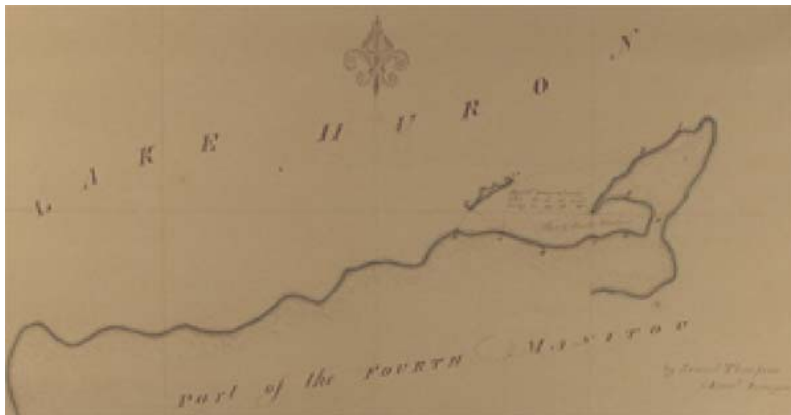
This was the first survey after the death of Mr. Ogilvy. Much of the correspondence between Thompson and Anthony Barclay, the new British Commissioner, dealt with the health of the members of the team.

Excerpts from the October 27, 1820 letter show the pride and relief Thompson feels with his son, Samuel now part of the team:



Sir
By reference to Dr. Bigsby I believe you will be informed that my son Samuel Thompson has diligently done the duty of a draftsman since the departure of Mr. Gray, and is now, and will be diligently kept at employment in calculations, maps, &c for the service of the Commission, until further orders. by the Plan which I shall submit to you for the survey of Lake Huron, it will be seen, the astronomer will receive an assistant, who at the same time must continually work in calculating and correcting the courses and distances as brought in by the surveys of the shores, Island &c &c. If this situation could be retained for my son who is able to fill it, I should esteem it a grat favor, his salary would be just what is thought proper.

Your very humble servant
David Thompson



These two maps are the work of Samuel Thompson, David's son.

Coll. 26, Map F 13 (detail)



Coll. 26, Map F 29 (detail)

In August 17, 1822 Thompson's letters show him preparing for the more grueling work of the survey west of Lake Superior in 1822 and 1823. He wrote this letter to Mr. Sayer asking him to assist on the survey by making inquiries of the Native Americans in the area.

Mr. Charles John Sayer

Sir/

I have to request of you on behalf of Anthony Barclay Esqr. His Majesty's Commissioner under the 6th & 7th Articles of the Treaty of Ghent that you will from this date to the month of next June 1823 use, and employ your knowledge of this country, and of the Indian language, to obtain from the natives, every Information possible of the headwaters of the Rivers that fall into Lake Superior from the River St. Louis, to the Dog River of Fort William, both inclusive. And also of the situation of all the head waters of the various streams that form the Rainy Lake River; from the most eastern of those that form the new road from Fort William to the most western that fall direct into the west side of the Rainy Lake River. If any of the headwaters of the Rivers that fall into Lake Superior, do not approach within one mile of the headwaters of the streams, lakes &c&c that at length form the Rainy Lake River, they may be noticed merely as showing their respective distances. But all those headwaters that are within one mile of each other, as correct information as possible must be obtained; and the nearer these headwaters approach each other, the greater attention must be paid to have the most accurate information of their situation &c&c And it is particularly requested, that the Indians draw with coal &c&c on birch Rind, maps of the countries, rivers, lakes &c&c. These maps you will be so good as bring out with you to Fort William in the latter end of next May; when, with an Indian Guide, you are requested to meet the person employed on the survey, to act as interpreter-

Guide &c in conjunction with one, or more of the native Indians. It is also particularly requested of you to inform yourself. If any lake between Lake Superior, and the Lake of the Woods, is known to the natives by the name of the Long Lake and if any lake is known to the natives by the name of the Long Lake; inform yourself, and get a map made, of its situation extne &c; and its connection with the waters that fall into Lake Superior; or that flow into the Lake of the Woods. And also note down the names of all those old persons, who inform you, the Lake now known to them by the name of the Long Lake was so called by the natives from their most early memory.

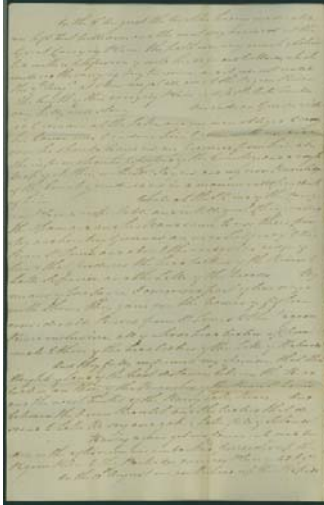
In consideration of these services, and those you have already rendered us, I shall apply to his majesty's Commissioners for a salary to remunerate you during the time you are employed in the service of the Commission.

Your humble servant
David Thompson
Ast. Surveyor to the Board of
Commission under the 6 & 7 Art
of the Treaty of Ghent.

The above Mr. Charles Sayer, is a native, a son of a Mrs. Sayer one of the first partners of the North West Coy. He was educated at Detroit; he then became a clerk to the North West Coy. and for several years has had the charge of a trading post in the countries between the Rainy Lake and the NW Coast of Lake Superior at a salary of L150 pro ann. The new order of affairs by the union of the two coys, reduces the salaries of all the clerks, and he is one of several who have refused to accept less. In this state he was recommended to me, by his intelligence and education as the person best adapted for the purpose of interpreter, guide &c &c.

Thompson was noted for his cordial relations with the Native Americans, indeed he married a Native American woman named Charlotte Small. On his extensive journeys during his fur trading days he might spend weeks or an entire winter season with a tribe, learning the language and creating maps based on their knowledge of the areas. Here, he is hoping to gain information from the Indians about the passages and waterways between Lake Superior and Lake of the Woods. Thompson's intent is to try and locate a geographical point referenced in the Treaty of Ghent which places the boundary.

In the following excerpt from a letter dated Nov. 12, 1822, Thompson tells Commissioner Barclay about the difficulties of travel along the Great Carrying Place and his meetings with some Native Americans.



While at the SE end of the Carrying Place, a respectable and intelligent chief, called the Spaniaco? and his band came to us; their country and hunting grounds are near halfway to the river St. Louis, and about the irregular ridge of land that produces the head waters of the Rivers to Lake Superior, and the Lake of the Woods. By means of Mr. Sayer, I conversed part of two days with them; they gave me the names of fifteen considerable rivers, from St. Louis to the Pigeon River inclusive; all of whose head waters, approximate to those of the head waters of the Lake of the Woods.

And they fully confirmed my opinion, that the heights of land of the least distance between the head waters, are those of the branches of the River St. Louis and the west forks of the Rainy Lake River. and between the Arrow Rivulet, and the waters that descend to Lake Kaseyanagah (Lake full of Islands).

This map showing the complex area of waterways around Lake Vermillion and Lake Sandy Point was created by Chief Wasp.



Coll. 26, Map F 23

The route between Lake Superior and Lake of the Woods was surveyed in 1823. In a letter dated August 23 written at Fort William on the western shore of Lake Superior Thompson describes the travels, meeting with the American team and work of the survey along the waterways. Also mentioned in this letter are strained relations with the American surveyor, James Ferguson. Mr. Thompson relates a conversation with Mr. Ferguson regarding the sharing of information with a humorous turn.

August 23rd 1823

Fort William
Lake Superior

Dear Sir/

My last letter was from this place, under date of the 26th June. In the afternoon of the 27 June we left this for the interior by the way of the Great Carrying Place; in two canoes. On the 7th July passed Lake Kaseiganagah, and resumed the survey of the Lakes &c by the old usual route of communication until the 16th July, when we entered the Lake of the Woods.

The survey was now continued along the west side of this Lake to its north extremity (as Rat Carrying Place) here we staid 3 days for observations, then resumed the survey of the main shore, coasting entirely round it; to the 28th when we entered the Rainy River; coming up which, we settled the distance of those Islands from the shores, which appeared doubtful.

August 1 - we entered the Rainy Lake; this day was passed in putting our canoes in order, and weather bound; the next morning we commenced the survey up the coast of this Lake, sketching in as usual the Islands contiguous to our route. On the 9th August we met Major Delafield and Mr. Ferguson in two canoes on their way to Lake Superior. On the 12 August we finished the survey of the Maine Land of the Rainy Lake and entered Lake Namakan; the state of our Provisions did not allow us to circumnavigate this lake; we had already surveyed the greatest part of it, and now coasted by the north shore to the River la Croix, continued the survey up this River into Lake la Croix to our former route in this lake, and to the end of the lake, is Bottle carrying Place. The low state of our provisions now obliged us to quit the survey, and hasten to Fort William on Lake Superior, when, thank God, we arrived early this morning. We found the Lake of the Woods, and the Rainy Lake so full of deep bays and innumerable islands, that we could only sketch in the very islands contiguous to us of this the maps we hope to send will give you a clear idea.

At the Rainy Lake I left a letter for Mr. Ferguson, requesting him to think whether it would not be proper for us to meet this winter, and compare our observations, maps &c &c, to correct each other, and from as accurate maps as possible, in unison

with each other, for the Board of Commission. To this I received no answer. On arriving here I had the pleasure of seeing him, and put the question direct to him as above stated; to which he replied, that he saw no reason for it, as he had all along worked separate he should keep his maps so. We are then each to each of us

present ^ his maps as they are to the Board. To this he answered in the affirmative. He now requested the result of my observations, on two, or three principal points of the survey, which he had not determined. I informed him the result of my observations would be found on the maps I should deliver to the Board: and thus parted. I have all along done every thing I can to act in concert as on the 6th Article, but all in vain. In a conversation with Major Delafield, he insisted that all the islands in the Lakes must be laid down, in order to determine what belonged to the Jurisdiction of the United States. I informed him I could not do it without orders to that effect. Should this be the case, the Lake of the Woods alone will require a summer for our canoe; the Rainy Lake little less; and all the other lakes very much time, besides what is to be done elsewhere. So far, as I can learn, the Lakes Kaseiganagah and La Croix, are the only two Lakes Mr. Ferguson and Party in two canoes, have been enabled fully to survey with all their islands. The astronomical observations of this season, in the interior countries amount to 40 for Lat 53 setts of lunar observations each sett 6 observations, for Longitude; and 32 setts for time.

We are now getting ready with all possible dispatch to cross this Lake, and if, please God; we have a favorable passage to the Falls of St. Maries; we shall commence the geometrical survey from the Neebish Rapids and continue it to about the 1 of October, when we expect to set off on our return to Montreal.

Dr. Bigsby having now personally visited these countries, will be able to give you all the information you require.

Hitherto I have received no letters from you since I left Montreal, and should you honor me with any, be so good as place them under cover to Mr. Hale, from whose hand they may come safe.

I am with Respect
your obedient
and humble servant
David Thompson

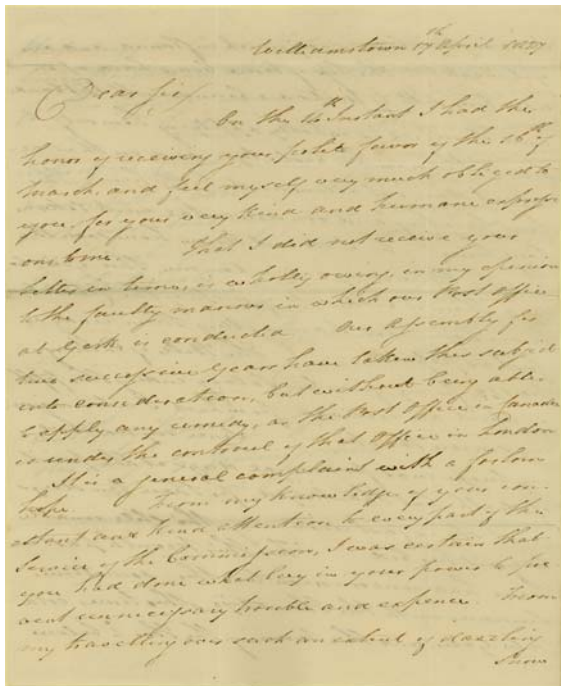
Anthony Barclay Esqr
H.M. Commissioner

In 1825 Commissioner Barclay himself traveled to the region with the German scientist/surveyor J.L. Tiarks. Tiarks was to resurvey the area of the Lake of the Woods to find its northwesternmost point. Negotiations between the American and British governments at this point had gone from being quite cordial in the early years to bitter and uncompromising around the boundary route between Lake Superior and Lake of the Wood. Thompson wrote to Anthony Barclay from Fort William on Lake Superior regarding supplies left for Barclay's group. The following map bears the initials A.B. (Anthony Barclay) and shows the complexities of the Pigeon River waterways.



Coll. 26, Map F 4

The following excerpt is taken from a letter written from Thompson's home in Williamstown, Ontario on April 17, 1827. It describes the meticulous work of his son, Samuel, with the maps, the slowness of the postal service, Thompson's health and his wife, Charlotte's recent illness.



Dear Sir/

On the 14th Instant I had the honor of receiving your polite favor of the 16th of March, and felt myself very much obliged to

you for your very kind and humane expressions to me. That I did not receive your letter in time, is wholly owing, in my opinion, to the faulty manner in which our Post Office at York is conducted. Our assembly for two successive years have taken this subject into consideration, but without being able to apply any remedy, as the Post Office in Canada is under the control of that Office in London.

It is a general complaint with a forlorn hope. From my knowledge of your constant and kind attention to every point of the service of the Commission, I was certain that you had done what lay in your power to prevent unnecessary trouble and expence. From my traveling over such an extent of dazzling snow, my eyes became very much inflamed, and are yet weak. The loss of time bears hard upon us. Five sets of maps are bound with ribbons and Samuel is wholly applying himself to finish them in his best style and on that account does not allow me to help him. His fine printing and ornamental work takes a long time. As I do not know how soon the Foreign Office may call upon me, thro' you, to send them a better set of maps of the Columbia River Countries, I am getting them ready as fast as possible. The bills of exchange No. 143 for my quarter salary ending this fifth of April are received, for which I return you my sincere thanks. Since my arrival my wife was for several days at the point of death; but Thank God, for these ten days past she is fast recovering. For this month past we have had uncommon weather, sometimes summer with the Therm at 70° at times cold NW gales, and this morning, the Therm 4° below the freezing point, and the ground frozen frequent heavy rains, and the aurora borealis very bright for the country indicating a cold stormy season...

Conclusion

David Thompson's work with the Boundary Commission ended in 1827. The Commission had succeeded in determining the boundary from the St. Lawrence River west to Lake Superior, but had failed to agree upon the line between Lake Superior and Lake of the Woods. It wasn't until 1842 that the United States and Canada would finalize that boundary.

Many more Thompson letters are waiting to be transcribed and the complete set of maps related to David Thompson will be digitized throughout the next year. It is hoped that the publication of these materials will cheer the hearts of the David Thompson enthusiasts and aid researchers in the further understanding of this point in history and the character of David Thompson.

"We flatter ourselves we have paid that attention to the Countries we have surveyed, as will enable us to produce Maps of those Countries satisfactory to your Honorable Board."

-David Thompson, Oct. 25, 1824 to Anthony Barclay, British Commissioner

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