

THE TRADE BEADS OF FORT RIVIÈRE TREMBLANTE, A NORTH WEST COMPANY POST ON THE UPPER ASSINIBOINE, SASKATCHEWAN

Karlis Karklins

The archaeological investigation of Fort Rivière Tremblante, a North West Company post that operated from 1791 to 1798 in what is now southeastern Saskatchewan, Canada, yielded 20,119 glass beads representing 63 varieties, as well as seven wampum. While the bulk of the collection is composed of drawn seed beads, it also contains an exceptional variety of fancy wound beads. A comparison with bead assemblages recovered from other contemporary fur trade sites in western Canada reveals that both the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company carried much the same bead inventory in the region around the turn of the 19th century, with slight variations to accommodate local tastes.

INTRODUCTION

Fort Rivière Tremblante, also known as Grant's House and Aspin House, was established for the North West Company by Robert Grant in 1791 on the Lower Assiniboine River near what is now the town of Kamsack in southeastern Saskatchewan. Situated in an area rich in beaver and otter pelts, the post became the headquarters of the NWC's Upper Red (Assiniboine) River Department (MacKie 1968:102). As such, it was also an important provisioning post for the brigades heading north to Athabasca (Syms and Smith 1984:26). In 1793, Robert Grant was replaced by Cuthbert Grant, Sr. His better-known son, Cuthbert Grant, Jr., the noted Métis leader, was born at the fort that same year.

While the post prospered for the first few years, by around 1795 the trade had waned due to the incursion of the Hudson's Bay Company into the region. This forced the NWC to abandon the post in 1798 and move to a location further upriver (Smythe 1968: no. 101). It was destroyed by fire in 1800. When J.B. Tyrell of the Geological Survey of Canada visited the site in 1890, only a chimney pile and several cellar depressions were visible and, by 1938, all evidence of the post had been eradicated by plowing (MacKie 1968:101).

Under the direction of Hugh T. MacKie, a crew from the University of Saskatchewan relocated the site and excavated it in 1967 and 1968 (MacKie 1968). This work revealed that the fort had consisted of a sizeable compound containing several buildings enclosed by a palisade with a bastion in the center of each wall (Figure 1). It also uncovered a wide variety of artifacts, including a sizeable assemblage of glass trade beads.¹

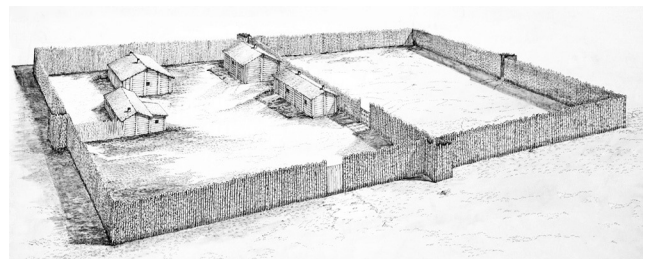


Figure 1. Conjectural reconstruction of the middle construction phase of Fort Rivière Tremblante (graphic: James Carson).

THE BEAD ASSEMBLAGE

Of both drawn and wound construction, the 20,119 glass beads are classified using the taxonomic system developed by Kenneth E. Kidd and Martha A. Kidd (1970) as expanded by Karklins (2012). Varieties that do not appear in the Kidds' lists are marked by an asterisk (*) followed by a sequential letter for ease of reference. The color names and codes correspond to those used in the *Munsell Bead Color Book* (Munsell Color 2012) (Table 1). Diaphaneity is described using the terms opaque (op.), translucent (tsl.), and transparent (tsp.). Opaque beads are impenetrable to light except on the thinnest edges. Specimens that are translucent transmit light but diffuse it so that an object (such as a pin in the perforation) viewed through them is indistinct. A pin in the perforation of a transparent bead is clearly visible. The size categories are based on bead diameter: very small (< 2 mm), small (2-4 mm), medium (4-6 mm), large (6-10 mm), and very large (> 10 mm).

Table 1. Munsell Color Codes.

Color Name	Code	Color Name	Code	Color Name	Code
Black	N 1/0	Light Gold	2.5Y 7/8	Medium Turquoise Blue	2.5B 5/5
Light Gray	N 7/0	Sunlight Yellow	5Y 8/8	Aqua Blue	2.5B 6/4
Oyster White	N 8/0	Dark Palm Green	10GY 4/4	Bright Blue	5B 5/7
White	N 9/0	Apple Green	10GY 6/6	Pale Blue	7.5B 8/2
Ruby	2.5R 3/10	Dark Green	2.5G 3/6	Shadow Blue	2.5PB 5/4
Light Red	5R 5/12	Bright Green	2.5G 5/10	Bright Navy	7.5PB 2/7
Redwood	10R 4/8	Turquoise	10BG 4/8	Rose Wine	10RP 4/6
Cinnamon	10YR 5/6	Bright Turquoise	7.5BG 6/8		

Drawn Glass Beads

Produced from segments of glass tubing drawn from a gather of molten glass, drawn beads comprise 97.7% (19,668 specimens) of the Rivière Tremblante bead assemblage. Thirty varieties are represented (Figure 2). In the case of the tubular beads, the ends range from unaltered breaks to well rounded.



Figure 2. Drawn glass beads. **Row 1** (l. to r.): Ia2, Ia4, Ia7. **Row 2:** Ia16, Ia19, Ia*(a), Ia*(b), Ia*(c), Ia*(d), Ib*(a). **Row 3:** IIa7, IIa12, IIa14, IIa17, IIa47, IIa56, IIa59, IIa*(a), IIa*(b), IIa*(c), IIa*(d), IIa*(e), IIa*(f), IIa*(g), IIb*(a), II*(a). **Row 4:** IIIa1, IIIa3, IIIa4, IVa6 (all photos by author).

Ia – Tubular, Monochrome, Undecorated

Ia2. Tubular; op. black; the glass appears tsl. rose wine on thin edges when held up to a strong light; small to medium; n=88.

Ia4. Tubular; tsl. oyster white generally flashed in clear glass; very small to large; n=862.

Ia*(a). Tubular; tsl. sunlight yellow; chalky patina; large; n=1.

Ia7. Tubular; tsl./op. light gold; most specimens exhibit a dull brown patina or have eroded surfaces; small; n=3.

Ia*(b). Tubular; tsl./op. dark palm green; small; n=1.

Ia*(c). Tubular; tsp. bright green; numerous linear bubble in the glass; very small to small; n=34.

Ia*(d). Tubular; tsp./tsl. medium turquoise blue; numerous linear bubbles in the glass; small; n=247.

Ia16. Tubular; op. shadow blue; small; n=5.

Ia19. Tubular; tsp. bright navy; very small to small; n=236.

Ib – Tubular, Monochrome, Straight Simple Stripes

Ib*(a). Tubular; tsp. bright navy; 11-13 op. white stripes; some specimens are slightly bent from heat rounding the ends; medium to large; n=19.

IIa – Non-Tubular, Monochrome, Undecorated

IIa*(a). Circular; tsp. ruby; the glass is patinated and decrepit; small; n=3.

IIa7. Circular; op. black; glass appears tsl. rose wine on thin edges when held up to a strong light; small to medium; n=333.

IIa*(b). Circular; tsp. light gray; small; n=103.

IIa12. Circular; tsl. oyster white; flashed in clear glass; shape ranges from oblate to short tube sections with rounded ends; very small to medium; n=9536.

IIa14. Circular; op. white; small; n=66.

IIa*(c). Tubular; tsp. sunlight yellow; specimens exhibit a thin brown patina or have eroded surfaces; small; n=8.

IIa17. Circular; tsl./op. light gold; most specimens exhibit a dull brown patina or have eroded surfaces; very small to small; n=514.

IIa*(d). Circular; tsl./op. dark palm green; a dull patina covers most specimens; very small to small; n=283.

IIa*(e). Circular; tsp. bright green; eroded surfaces; small; n=49.

IIa*(f). Circular; tsp./tsl. medium turquoise blue; shape ranges from oblate to short tube sections with rounded ends; numerous linear bubbles in the glass; very small to medium; n=5595.

IIa47. Circular; op. shadow blue; small; n=14.

IIa56. Circular; tsp. bright navy; shape ranges from oblate to short tube sections with rounded ends; small; n=238.

IIa*(g). Circular; tsl./op. bright navy; small; n=116.

IIa59. Circular; tsp. rose wine; small; n=31.

IIb – Non-Tubular, Monochrome, Straight Simple Stripes

IIb*(a). Circular; op. white; two op. light gold and two tsl. bright turquoise stripes; small; n=2.

IIc – Tubular, Monochrome, Surfaces Modified by Grinding

IIc*(a). Faceted circular; tsp. rose wine; surface exhibits one to eight random cut facets; small; n=79.

IIIa – Tubular, Multi-Layered, Undecorated

IIIa1. Tubular; op. redwood exterior; op. black core; medium to large; n=23.

IIIa3. Tubular; op. redwood exterior; tsp. apple green core; small to large; n=115.

IIIa4. Tubular; op. redwood exterior; tsp. bright blue core; medium; n=1.

IVa – Non-Tubular, Multi-Layered, Undecorated

IVa6. Circular; op. redwood exterior; tsp. apple green core; small to medium; n=1063.

Wound Glass Beads

Beads in this category were formed by winding a strand of molten glass around a metal mandrel until the desired size and shape were achieved. Decoration could be applied to the surface and marvered into it while the glass was still viscid. Thirty-three varieties are represented (Figures 3-4).

WIb – Monochrome Round

WIb*(a). Round; tsp. light red; the glass is patinated and eroded; small; n=3.

WIb*(b). Round; op. black; the glass appears tsp. dark green on thin edges when held up to a strong light; small; n=2.

WIb1. Round; tsp./tsl. light gray; most specimens have “frosted” surfaces and the glass is crackled; medium and very large; n=37.

WIc – Monochrome Oval

WIc*(a). Oval; tsp. ruby; eroded patinated surfaces; small to large; n=41.

WIc*(b). Oval; op. black; glass appears tsp. dark green on thin edges on some specimens and rose wine on others when held up to a strong light; surfaces are covered with iridescent patina or the glass is eroded; two beads are conjoined at the ends; small to large; n=56.

WIc1. Oval; op. white; wind marks evident; dull to shiny surfaces with many specimens exhibiting a dull brown patina; small to large; n=74.

WIc3. Oval; tsl. pale blue; dull surfaces; very large; n=2.

WIc*(c). Oval; op. cinnamon; dull surfaces; medium; n=6.

WIc*(d). Oval; op. light gold; dull to shiny surfaces; small to medium; n=31.

WIc*(e). Oval; op. dark palm green; small to medium; n=13.

WIc9. Oval; op. aqua blue; dull surfaces; most specimens exhibit a heavy brown patina; two beads are joined end to end; small to large; n=41.

WIc*(f). Oval; tsp. bright navy; most specimens exhibit an iridescent patina; small to very large; n=32.

WII – Monochrome, Truncated Teardrop

WII*(a). Truncated teardrop; tsl. light gray; dull, crackled surface; medium; n=1.



Figure 3. Wound glass beads. **Row 1** (l. to r.): W1b1, W1b*(a), W1b*(b), W1c1, W1c3, W1c9, W1c*(a), W1c*(b). **Row 2:** W1c*(c), W1c*(d), W1c*(e), W1c*(f), W1i*(a). **Row 3:** W111b*(a), W111b*(d), W111b*(e). **Row 4:** W111b*(h), W111b*(i), W111b*(j), W111b*(k), W111b*(l). **Row 5:** W111b*(m), W111b*(n), W111b*(o), W111b*(p). **Row 6:** W111b*(q), W111b*(r), W111b*(s), W111b*(t).

W111b – Monochrome, Simple Shapes, Inlaid Decoration

W111b*(a). Round; op. black body divided into eight squares by an op. light gold 2x4 grid; each square contains a ruby-on-white eye; large; n=2.

W111b*(b). Round; tsp. turquoise with an op. white wreath around the middle; covered with a dull or iridescent patina; very large; n=1.

W111b*(c). Round; tsp. turquoise decorated with ca. six floral elements set parallel to the perforation: ruby-on-white “blossoms” flanked by op. light gold leaves; very large; n=2.

W111b*(d). Round; op. aqua blue with five ruby-on-white and ten bright navy-on-white eyes; most specimens are patinated; large; n=11.

W111b*(e). Oval; op. black with a wavy stripe of op. white and a plain stripe of op. aqua blue spiraling around the bead; most specimens exhibit an iridescent patina; the black glass of this variety and the ones listed below appears tsl. rose wine on thin edges; large; n=4.

W111b*(f). Oval; op. black with a spiral band of aventurine and a spiral series of alternating op. white (bluish tint) and



Figure 4. Very large wound glass beads. **Row 1** (l. to r.): W1b1, W1c3 pigeon egg, W1c*(f) pigeon egg. **Row 2:** W11b*(b), W11b*(c), W11b*(f), W11b*(g).

tsl. bright turquoise dots; dull to iridescent patina; very large; n=2.

W11b*(g). Oval; tsp. light gray decorated with three “blossoms” composed of a ruby-on-white eye surrounded by six bright navy-on-white dots and three pairs of tulip-like flowers with ruby-on-white blossoms and op. light gold leaves; very large; n=8.

W11b*(h). Oval; op. white with a tsp. ruby wreath around the middle (most of the inlay is now missing); large; n=3.

W11b*(i). Oval; op. white with a tsp. bright navy wreath around the middle; large; n=9.

W11b*(j). Oval; op. white with a medial wreath of alternating op. dark palm green and tsp. ruby; most specimens are patinated; large; n=19.

W11b*(k). Oval; op. white with a tsp. ruby wreath around the middle and an op. dark palm green wavy line around either end; large; n=4.

W11b*(l). Oval; op. white with a wavy op. dark palm green line around the middle and a wavy tsp. ruby line around either end; large; n=6.

W11b*(m). Oval; op. white with a band of aventurine around the middle and a wavy tsp. ruby line around either end; large; n=1.

W11b*(n). Oval; op. white with four tsp. bright navy wreaths set parallel to the perforation; large; n=3.

W11b*(o). Oval; op. white with four wreaths set parallel to the perforation: two tsp. bright navy and two with bright navy stalks and tsp. ruby leaves; large; n=4.

W11b*(p). Oval; op. white with two tsp. ruby and two tsl. bright turquoise stripes set parallel to the perforation; large; n=1.

W11b*(q). Oval; op. white with two tsp. ruby and two tsl. bright turquoise dots alternating around the middle; large; n=1.

W11b*(r). Oval; op. white with five pairs of tsl. bright navy dots alternating with five light gold-on-bright turquoise eyes around the middle and a wavy tsp. ruby loop around either end; large; n=1.

W11b*(s). Oval; op. aqua blue decorated with a spiral band of aventurine and a spiral band composed of alternating op. white, tsp. ruby, and tsp. bright navy diagonals; patinated; large; n=6.

W11b*(t). Oval; tsp. bright navy with nine op. light gold dots; most specimens are patinated; medium to large; n=24.

Wampum

Seven shell wampum beads (Figure 5) are in the collection: two white, four purple, and one gray (calcined). They are small and measure 5.8-6.4 mm in length and 2.8-3.6 mm in diameter. One specimen is gouged and irregular in outline. One side exhibits a 2-mm-long remnant of an unfinished drill hole revealing that an initial hole was begun but the bead split and a new hole had to be drilled.

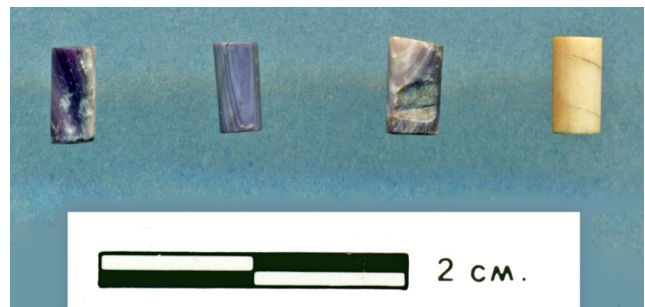


Figure 5. Purple and white wampum.

DISCUSSION

Small, undecorated seed beads dominate the Fort Rivière Tremblante bead assemblage. White (53% of the seed bead group) and blue (33%) beads predominate with opaque red beads a distant third (6%). The wound bead group is characterized by oval “barley corn” beads with white (28% of the wound group) and blue (26%) being the principal body colors with black (14%) in third place. This preference for blue and white has been noted at many other

sites in western Canada and the adjacent United States (pers. obs.).

Most of the bead varieties excavated at Rivière Tremblante are replicated in the assemblages recovered from other contemporary western Canadian fur trade posts, with the most correlatives noted at NWC Fort George (1792-ca. 1800; east-central Alberta) (Kidd 1970) and Rocky Mountain House (1799-1821; west-central Alberta) (Steer and Rogers 1978), as well as HBC Nottingham House (1802-1806; northeastern Alberta) (Karklins 1983), Buckingham House (1792-1800; east-central Alberta) (Nicks 1969), and York Factory (1791-1957; northeastern Manitoba) (Karklins and Adams 2013). In that these sites are spread over much of western Canada (Figure 6), the indication is that both the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company, and likely free traders as well, had similar bead inventories in the region around the turn of the 19th century, with regional variations to accommodate local tastes.

What distinguishes this bead assemblage from the others is the presence of an exceptionally high number of fancy wound beads decorated with various forms of inlaid decoration. While such beads are scarce at most sites, if present at all, there are 20 varieties represented by 112 specimens at Rivière Tremblante. Of the 17 fur trade sites canvassed for this study, only York Factory has anything comparable, yielding 24 varieties represented by 94 specimens (Karklins and Adams 2013). Only eight

of the varieties have correlatives at Rivière Tremblante. Considering the lengthy occupation of York Factory and the fact that some of the varieties found there likely date to a later period, the Rivière Tremblante assemblage provides the best representation of fancy beads in the western fur trade region around the turn of the 19th century.

While information concerning the trade value of beads at Rivière Tremblante is lacking, the rate of exchange at York Factory in 1776 was six beaver pelts for a pound of “round [or] barley corn [oval] white flowd. [flowered] red & green” beads while the “large, middling & small rod. [round] white [and] blue” beads went for just two pelts. By comparison, the cost of the fancy beads was quite steep in that seven pelts could purchase a pistol or a blanket (Karklins and Adams 2013:97).

CONCLUSION

It is unfortunate that no post journals or other documents survive that might reveal details concerning specific rates of exchange, the quantities of beads that were imported and traded, which varieties were the most preferred by the indigenous population, and how they were utilized by them. Nonetheless, the beads themselves do provide a snapshot of what passed through the fort’s gates during a period of intense rivalry between the relatively new North West Company and the well-established Hudson’s Bay Company.

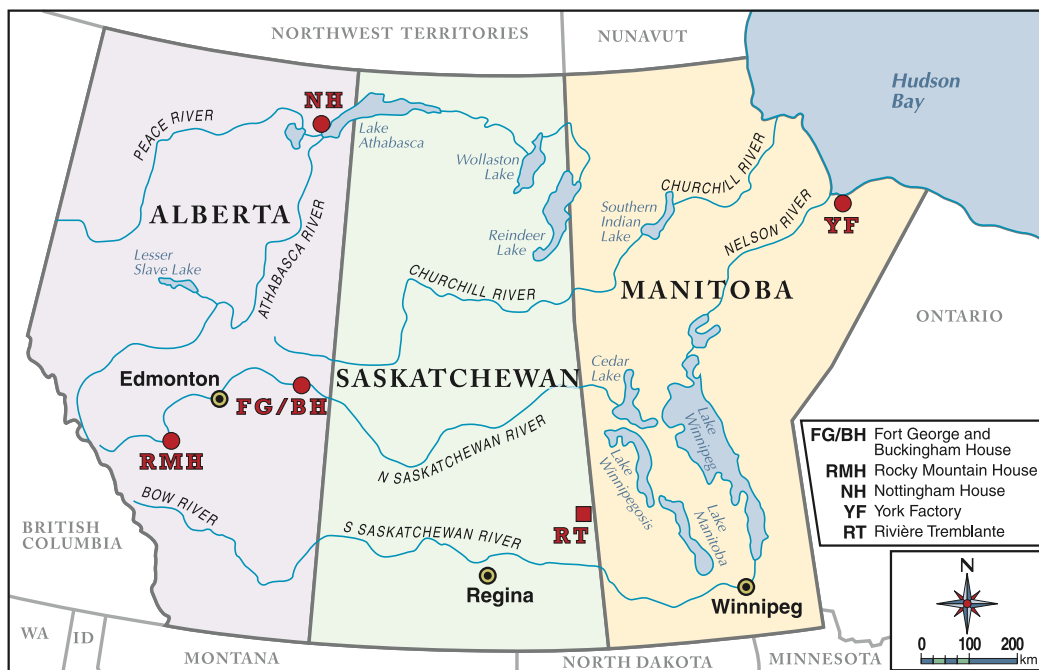


Figure 6. The Canadian prairie provinces showing the location of Fort Rivière Tremblante (RT) and other contemporary trading posts mentioned in the text (graphic: David Weisel).

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ENDNOTES

1. The beads are now curated in the collections of The Manitoba Museum, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

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Karlis Karklins
Independent Researcher
Ottawa, ON
Canada
karlis4444@gmail.com