

Parry's Flagstaff Site near Igloolik, Northwest Territories

William Edward Parry's "Second voyage for the discovery of a north-west passage," during the years 1821 to 1823, took him to the shores of Melville Peninsula in Canada's Eastern Arctic. The expedition spent its first winter on a small island east of Repulse Bay, appropriately named Winter Island by Parry. The second winter was passed on Igloolik Island at the eastern end of an ice-strewn strait separating the north shore of Melville Peninsula from Baffin Island. Parry was to name this strait "Fury and Hecla" in commemoration of the two ships then under his command.

In terms of its stated exploration goal — the discovery of a northern sea route from the Atlantic to the Pacific — the voyage was a failure. Heavy ice in Fury and Hecla Strait effectively barred the westerly progress of Parry's ships and unmistakable signs of scurvy among his crews persuaded him to abandon plans to spend a third winter in the region. The expedition, however, was not without its achievements. The many scientific investigations carried out by Parry and his officers added considerably to contemporary European knowledge of the lands and sea to the north of Hudson Bay. But the enduring legacy of the expedition is found in the accounts of early 19th-century Inuit life published in 1824 by Parry and George Francis Lyon, commander of the *Hecla*, on their return to England. These remarkable accounts, together with the unpublished journals of William Harvey Hooper, purser of the *Fury*, William Mogg, clerk of the *Hecla*, and George Fisher, the expedition's astronomer, are among the first truly detailed descriptions we have of Inuit in Canada's Eastern Arctic.

On the morning prior to the expedition's departure from Igloolik, 11 August 1823, Parry records that he:

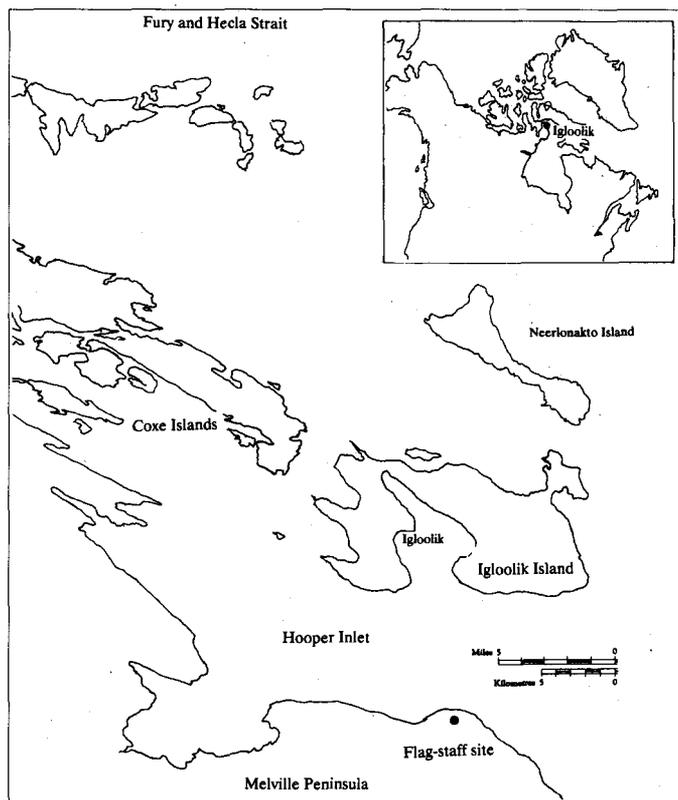
ran across to the main-land in the *Fury*, for the purpose of erecting, in compliance with my instructions, a flag-staff fifty-six feet in height, having at its top a ball made of iron hoops and canvas, ten feet in diameter, and a cylinder buried near its foot, containing a parchment with some account of our visit to this place [Parry, 1824:474].

The Admiralty instructions requiring this particular action were premised on (we can now say) the overly optimistic view that this flagstaff, and others like it, would serve as a marker for Captain John Franklin "should he pass this way," as Lyon so tentatively puts it. Franklin was then leading a similarly constituted expedition eastwards from the Coppermine River. The pertinent section of Parry's instructions read:

His Majesty's Government having appointed Captain Franklin to the command of an expedition to explore the northern coast of North America, from the mouth of the Coppermine River of Hearn, eastward, it would be desirable, if you should reach that coast, that you should mark your progress by erecting a flagstaff in a few of the most convenient and distinguishable points which you may successively visit, and you are to bury at the foot of each staff a bottle, containing such information as may be useful to Captain Franklin, and such further particulars respecting your own proceedings as you may think proper to add . . . [Parry, 1824:xxviii].

Franklin was instructed to position similar markers along his route in the event of Parry's successful progress to the west.

Not surprisingly, the journals of Parry's fellow officers also make reference to the flagstaff, each adding something to our



Sketch map showing the location of the Parry site. The inset shows the location of Igloolik in a North American context.

picture of the structure and its placement. Hooper (1821-23:971) agrees with Parry on the mast's dimensions but adds that the canvas ball that topped the structure was "painted black." Lyon (1824:445) mentions that the flagstaff was in fact the *Fury*'s "hand-mast" and that it was set up with "good strong rigging," a clear indication that the mast was supported by guy-ropes and was not a free-standing structure. And from Mogg (1821-23:289) we get some idea of the considerable effort required to complete the task: "three boats with their crews of twenty men" were needed to set the mast in position.

Parry and Hooper both record (one seems to have copied verbatim from the other) that a "parchment" containing an account of their visit to Igloolik was buried in a cylinder "near" the foot of the mast. Lyon, in contrast, writes that "letters were buried" at (rather than near) the mast's foot. Mogg's entry, while referring to "instructions enclosed in a copper cylinder to Capt. Franklin," makes no mention of where the cylinder was buried. Parry's chart of the Igloolik region published in his *Journal of a Second Voyage* . . . clearly marks the site on the shore of Melville Peninsula with the notation: "A flag-staff erected here."

Flagstaff and record dutifully seen to, Parry's ships sailed from Igloolik waters on 12 August 1823, never to return. Local tradition has it that the ships were permanently driven away by strong winds conjured up by the shaman Qulliqaujaq, who, it is said, had been ill treated by Parry for stealing a shovel (Harvé Paniaq, Igloolik, pers. comm. 1990).

Almost certainly the mast did not stand long after Parry's departure. The wealth of useful materials invested in the site — wood, metal, canvas and rope — must have been too valuable an asset for reasonable Inuit to leave intact. They may well have considered the mast a final, though curious, parting gift from Parry. He had, after all, before leaving Igloolik, purposely left for Inuit use: "... sledges and a quantity of wood . . . of a convenient size for bows, spears, and paddles . . . [distributed] . . . about in several places, that one or two individuals might not make a prize of the whole" (Parry, 1824:474). In any case, Parry would have had no doubts about the imminent fate of his flagstaff. Parry may even have been amused that this significant windfall for his Inuit friends proceeded directly from Admiralty instructions intended only to benefit Captain Franklin.

Unfortunately nothing is preserved in local Igloolik traditions telling how the Inuit dismantled the flagstaff or used its materials. But we may be sure the mast was put to good use: wood, the preferred material for sled runners, was so scarce in the Igloolik region that it was not uncommon to substitute blocks of ice or frozen walrus skin for this purpose (Parry, 1824:206).

So impressed were Parry and his officers by the need Inuit had for wood that even coffins were held vulnerable. Hooper's journal (1821-23:399-401) mentions precautions taken during the burial of a sailor, James Pringle, in Winter Island on 19 May 1822: "The Esquimaux, who were watching the procession with an appearance of great curiosity, were purposely kept away to prevent their seeing the wooden coffin lest they might be tempted to disturb the grave for the sake of it."

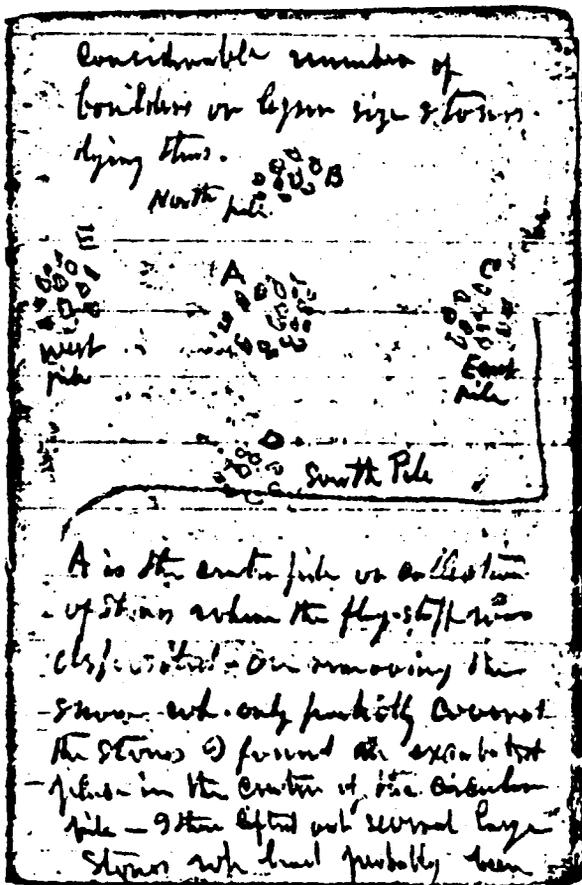
The first recorded visit to the site after Parry's departure was made 44 years later by the American explorer Charles Francis Hall. He had come to Igloolik from his base at Repulse Bay to buy sled dogs for an expedition he hoped to make to King William Island. Hall was acting on what he firmly believed to be a God-given mission to discover survivors of Sir John Franklin's missing northwest passage expedition. It was known that Franklin himself had died in 1847, but Hall was convinced that some of his men had survived and were now living in the desolate vicinity of King William Island patiently awaiting rescue (Loomis, 1971).

Hall (1867) was well received by the Inuit of Igloolik. His diary entries show he was ecstatic about their hospitality: "I am feasted from morn to night by the Igloolik Innuits [and] I do not believe there is a kinder more harmless or more honest people living . . . in the wide world than these Igloolik natives." He succeeded, though not without some difficulty, in purchasing the dogs he needed.

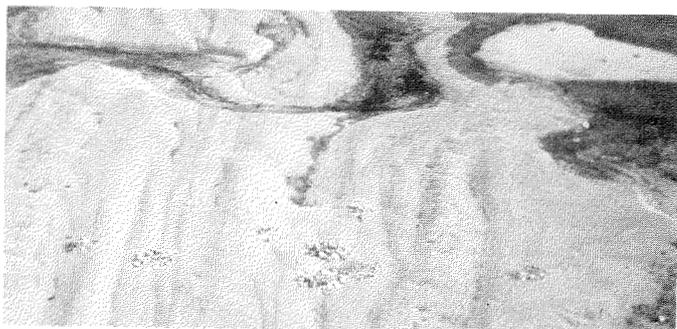
During his stay in the Igloolik area, Hall was able to record local traditions and recollections about Parry and Lyon, acquire some "relics of Parry," including "fragments of Wedgewood ware," and visit a number of places associated with the British expedition. Hall's earlier plans to visit the flagstaff site had been postponed due to his sled being "in constant demand" by Inuit making camp moves, but on 14 March 1867 he was finally guided there by two Igloolik Inuit, Aglooka and Artungun.

On the way to the site Hall and his party stopped briefly to inspect one of the iron ice anchors left by Parry on Igloolik Island. This done, they crossed Hooper Inlet to the nearby mainland on Melville Peninsula. Hall's account is worth quoting in full:

Arrive to the shore near flag-staff spot X.15 [10:15 A.M.] at rate of 4½ miles per hour. Just as we came near shore sledge plunged deep in to a snow-bank & being thus well anchored we all left it & the dogs & proceeded into the land wh. is very low & of disintegrated limestone. Ang-loo-ka & Ar-tung-un led the way & shortly brought me to the very spot wh. they say is where the flag-staff was that Parry & Lyon erected & there can be no doubt that this is fact for there is a considerable number of boulders or lesser size stones lying there. Ar-tung-un pointed out me a monument not far from the shore erected by Parry not far from the flag-staff. [No conclusive evidence of this "monument" remains at the site.] "A" [Hall is here referring to the sketch of the site made in his notebook; see accompanying illustration] is the centre of a pile or collection of stones where the flag-staff was deposited. On removing the snow wh. only partially covered the stones, I found an excavated place in the centre of the circular pile. I then lifted out several large stones, wh. had probably been thrown in when the flag-staff had been taken down. Then I came to disintegrated limestone of size that one could hold 50 or so pieces in one hand. On removing a mass of this, I came to chips and fragmentary pieces of the flag-staff. After digging down 2 feet, I came to where the limestones were frozen solid, thus preventing any further research downward. These chips and fragmentary pieces of flag-staff I bagged as well as 2 handfuls of the limestone in wh. I found said pieces of wood. Could I have dug down into the frozen mass of limestones, I doubt not I could have found the bottle containing the written document wh. Parry executed and deposited there. "B" "C" "D" & "E" represent 4 piles or collections of granite stones wh. Ag-loo-ka says were the 4 anchor points or places to each of wh. an at-tloo-na . . . rope was made fast the other end being fast to the ne-pou-e-tu (mast or flag-staff) to hold it in place (vertical). The piles, or collections, of stones about the flag-staff



Page from Hall's notebook describing the flagstaff site.



Aerial photograph of the flagstaff site looking eastwards. The four piles of rocks boxing the site's centre and corresponding to the cardinal points of the compass were used to anchor the mast's guy ropes. Note the two large rock piles on the east and west sides of the centre hole. These rocks originally used to support the flagstaff, but they later served as oil-rendering caches for Inuit. (Photo credit: J. MacDonald.)



Looking northeast across the centre hole. George Qulaut inspects the remains of Inuit caches constructed from the stones used to support the flagstaff. (Photo credit: J. MacDonald.)

spot are placed in such order as to represent the 4 cardinal points of the true compass. From centre of flag-staff hole to each of the 4 piles of stones about 55 to 56 feet. From high water mark of the nearest sea coast — to flag-staff spot 40 of my measure or 384 feet. There is a furrow or trench now evident just as distinct as when 1st made from the sea coast to the flag-staff spot as made in dragging the flag-staff from the sea water to where it was raised — this furrow made in the disintegrated limestone & rounded form — in some places 2 to 4 inches in depth. I was greatly surprised to find this trench so perfect & unmistakable as to its cause. 1st thing found on digging for the bottle a thong of sealskin — found small piece of tow-line close to the fragments of the flag-staff some quite fresh in appearance. Kow-pra-look-too the native name of the land on wh. the flagstaff spot is & in that locality. [Qupirquutuq (meaning "worms") is a lake situated a few kilometres south of the flagstaff site. Inuit now refer to the land on which the flagstaff stood as Uuttusivik ("vagina place").]

Hall's investigations at the site took him about an hour and a half. Foregoing a visit to the grave of Alexander Elder, a sailor of Parry's buried on Igloolik Island, Hall headed directly back to his camp across the Inlet in rapidly deteriorating weather, his guide Artungun at the same time coming down with severe "influenza" symptoms. Hall's (1867) diary for this day plaintively concludes: "I know not where I have ever suffered with the cold as today on my trip to the flag-staff spot . . ."

The next recorded visit to the vicinity of the site, albeit an unwitting one, was made by Alfred Tremblay. A prospector, Tremblay had joined Captain Joseph Bernier's gold-seeking expedition on the schooner *Minnie Maud* to the Pond Inlet area in 1912. In the early spring of 1913 Tremblay, enabled by Inuit guides, extended his mineral explorations south to Fury and Hecla Strait, thereby becoming the first white man to reach Igloolik overland from the north. Tremblay, who knew nothing of Hall's visit to Igloolik and, it seems, little of Parry's, realized only after the fact that he had passed near the flagstaff site. His reference to it is therefore somewhat apologetic and hints of lost opportunity:

. . . no signs of the flagstaff were visible when I crossed the land near the spot where it was erected and as I had, unfortunately, no knowledge at that time of the fact or the place that he had left such a record, I made no effort to find it [Tremblay, 1921:204].

The location, original purpose and historical associations of the flagstaff site are not widely known in Igloolik at present. George Qulaut, however, recalled that his grandfather, Primo

Itikutsuk, had told him about the site and its connection with Paariviniq ("the former Parry"). Moreover, Itikutsuk had explained how to get there: an imaginary line extended from Igloolik's old Roman Catholic mission building through the southwest point of Turton Bay would touch the shore of Melville Peninsula exactly below the site.

Combining Itikutsuk's directions with Parry's map and Hall's account, George Qulaut and I made our way to the flagstaff site by canoe on 24 August 1989. On reaching the shore near the site's presumed vicinity, the collections of rocks, so clearly described by Hall, were not immediately evident due to an abundance of other likely looking but unrelated stone structures (mainly the remains of caches and tent rings) built by Inuit along that stretch of coastline.

Believing we had landed too far to the west, we walked eastwards along the shore inspecting, and discounting by turn, various assemblies of stones that could have marked the site. When we eventually reached the site proper there was no mistaking it. Located approximately at 69°16'N, 81°42'W, the orientation and placement of the rock piles were more or less exactly as described by Hall. His rough dimensional survey of the spot agrees largely with our own, except that Hall's "measure" appears to be slightly on the high side: he gives 55-56 feet (16.6-17.1 m) as the distance between the flagstaff hole and guy-anchoring rock piles, whereas our measurement, by tape, shows 46-49 feet (14.0-14.9 m). By contrast, our estimation of the distance from the flagstaff hole to the nearest point on the shore line exceeds Hall's by 56 feet (17.1 m), his being 384 feet (117 m), ours 440 feet (134 m). The discrepancy may, in part, be attributed to the indistinct shoreline, due to snow cover, that would have existed during Hall's late winter visit to the site. It is also possible that some of the difference may be explained by the post-glacial phenomenon of isostatic rebound, which causes the land around Igloolik to rise at a vertical rate of around 1 m a century (L. Dredge, pers. comm. 1991). The intervening years between Hall's time and ours would have inevitably put the site farther from the shore.

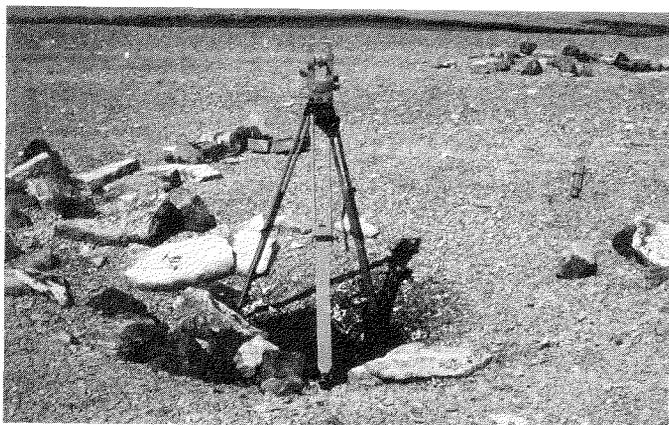
Relative to the site's centre, the four guy anchors were arranged, as Hall notes, to correspond with the four cardinal points of the compass. On a subsequent visit to the site with Joannie Ijjangiaq on 4 July 1990, we took theodolite bearings of the anchor piles and found them positioned almost exactly as claimed. The north-south axis, on which the arrangement of the site was presumably based, was within 2° of "true." Such accuracy suggests that Parry's men, in setting up the flagstaff, likely determined the layout of the site by astronomical rather than magnetic means, the latter being notoriously inaccurate around the Igloolik area.

The numerous large boulders at the centre of the site that originally served as the mast's main support and were, at the time of Hall's visit, placed in a "circular pile" around the flagstaff hole, have since been rearranged and put to good use by Inuit. The boulders are now found in two piles of approximately equal size, one placed on the west side of the hole, the other on the east, each fashioned into a cache-like structure (*ursuutikkuvik* in Inuktitut; E. Imaruittuq, Igloodik, pers. comm. 1991) for storing sealskin bags of rendered blubber. There was no evidence that the caches have been used in recent years.

The centre hole, which Hall had so hopefully excavated, measured approximately 0.6 m deep and 0.9 m across. It was partly filled with water and its eroded sides sloped gently inwards. Between 20 and 30 wood fragments were found in the vicinity of the hole, the largest measuring 12.7 cm by 1.9 cm. These weathered fragments of wood, a few of them obviously hewn, were in every way similar to "chips and fragmentary pieces of the flag-staff" gathered by Hall.

Another less evident feature of the site (and one that Hall noted with some amazement) was the "furrow or trench . . . made in dragging the flag-staff from the sea water to where it was raised." Had Hall not remarked this feature or suggested its apparent cause, we would have probably missed it or, in any event, not linked it to the site. The furrow, perhaps not as obvious as it was in Hall's day, now competes for attention with a growing number of other surface scars having roughly the same orientation, some occurring naturally, others made by occasionally passing snowmobiles and sleds. Once located, however, the course of the now discontinuous furrow can be readily traced from the flagstaff hole to the nearby shore.

We have no evidence that the copper cylinder with its "parchment" buried by Parry near the foot of the flagstaff has ever been recovered. The reasonable assumption is that Inuit found it shortly after Parry's departure. But, had this been the case, one suspects that some memory of the discovery would have been related to Hall by his Inuit hosts. They had, after all, freely acquainted him with so many of their recollections about the British expedition, some of them wonderfully detailed, such as how Parry and Lyon "used to take hold of the noses of the little children, give them a shake and say pretty little girl!" (Hall's notebook, 4 March 1867). Had Aglooka or Artungun known anything of the record's recovery, they



Theodolite straddling the flagstaff hole. Charles Francis Hall excavated here in 1867 searching for Parry's record. Wood fragments from the mast found in the vicinity of the hole lie on top of the large boulder to the left of the theodolite.



Close-up of flagstaff fragments found on the site. Subsequent analysis showed these wooden splinters to be of red pine. (Photo credit: J. MacDonald.)

would likely have mentioned it, if not to spare Hall the effort of fruitless digging, then at least to shorten their lingering around the site in worsening weather.

Hall was convinced that he would have found the record had he been able to dig "down into the frozen mass of limestones." But, permafrost or not, it is likely his search would have been in any case futile: he was simply excavating in the wrong spot. Why Hall assumed that Parry's men had deposited a cylinder in a hole into which they then placed a 56 foot mast, propped up by numerous heavy boulders, is puzzling. Aside from the obvious practical drawbacks of recovering a record from such a placement, Parry's journal (which Hall had in his possession) clearly states that the cylinder was buried "near" the foot of the flagstaff. One explanation is that Hall was being guided, not by Parry's own account of the record's placement, but by the Admiralty instructions quoted by Parry (and cited above) in his journal's introduction. Hall's reference to the record being contained in a "bottle," in contrast to the cylinder mentioned by Parry, clearly comes from the latter source. Moreover the Admiralty instructions required the record to be buried "at the foot" of the flagstaff, a somewhat ambiguous instruction, which Hall seems to have taken to mean "under" rather than "beside" the mast.

Is the record still at the site? It might have been buried according to some prior plan known to Parry and Franklin and their respective officers before their departure from England. We know, for instance, that in areas where expeditions' cairns were likely to be disturbed by Inuit, records were sometimes buried unobtrusively at prearranged distances, say ten paces or ten feet due true north of the cairn (C. Phillips, pers. comm. 1991; J. Savelle, pers. comm. 1991). Certainly by the time of the Franklin search era, 1845-59, the Admiralty had established official conventions for the burial and concealment of such records. That a similar arrangement was used at Parry's flagstaff site is at least suggested by the precise alignment of the guy anchor rocks, in particular those piles forming the north-south axis. This clearly deliberate alignment of the guy anchors may have been nothing more than a normal expression of Royal Navy orderliness. But, more purposefully, it could also have been intended to facilitate the authorized location of the record in an area where directional bearings could

not be accurately established by magnetic compass. An interested archaeologist may yet decide the question.

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