

The great river and lake systems of this district were the routes used by the early explorers of northwestern America in their travels. Before Canada became a British possession, the La Verendryes had explored the Saskatchewan. Following the cession of the colonies to Great Britain, fur traders from the St. Lawrence followed the same route and worked northward from the Saskatchewan towards the Athabaska.

Meanwhile the Hudson's Bay Company several times undertook to make explorations of the country to the northwest. One of their officials, the famous Samuel Hearne, did really penetrate the interior, travelling across country from Fort Churchill to the Arctic ocean. After his return he was sent inland to establish a post to compete with the St. Lawrence traders for the furs of the Athabaska-Saskatchewan country which, with the arrival of these competitors from the south, were no longer being brought down to Hudson bay. He built the first permanent post at Cumberland House in 1774. In 1772 Joseph Frobisher and his brother, fur traders from the St. Lawrence, had built a temporary establishment there while on a journey to the Churchill River basin. The year following the building of Cumberland House by Hearne, the Frobishers were again in the country and they joined forces with another fur trader, Alexander Henry. These three men went up the Maligne (Sturgeon-weir) river to Amisk (Beaver) lake arriving on November 1, 1775, just before the ice began to form. Here, they built winter quarters consisting of five buildings, but on what part of the lake Henry does not say. The following extract from his journal, however, shows that it certainly was not at the outlet of the lake:

"On the first of January, 1776, I left our fort on Beaver lake. At night we made our first encampment at the head of the Maligne where one of our parties was fishing but with indifferent success."

The most likely place for men going to the Churchill country, as the Frobishers and Henry intended doing, would be the inlet of the lake. This, however, is only 12 miles from the outlet—a very short day's journey. The north end of the lake would be a day's journey from the outlet but would be a most unlikely place for an establishment. On the northern mainland, just north of what is known as Vick's land, there are traces of old houses. Only three buildings have been found. In the largest house there was a fire-place of flat stones at the middle of the north wall. In the house to the east, the fire-place was in the corner of the room. The third building was probably a store-house. The walls of the houses are now merely low mounds of earth in which are embedded some rotten timber. Over what appears to have been the floor there is a layer of a foot or more of clay. Upon the clay and debris about the