

Campbell versus Hawkins:

The Sometimes Stormy Relationship between the American & British Commissioners to the 1857-1862 Northwest Boundary Survey.

Another of my interests is the 1857-1862 survey of the International Boundary from the Gulf of Georgia to the Summit of the Rocky Mountains. While researching the survey I have discovered various references to the somewhat rocky relationship between the American Commissioner, Archibald Campbell and his British counterpart, Colonel John Summerfield Hawkins. By researching the correspondence between the two, together with journals, diaries and autobiographies of the various surveyors who worked with them, I came to a better understanding of what both of them were like.

Archibald Campbell was born in Albany, New York in 1813 and graduated from West Point Military Academy in 1835. After serving in various capacities, Campbell left the military in 1837 to pursue a career in civil engineering. In 1845 he left the private sector and began what would be a 31 year career with the U.S. government. In 1857 Campbell was appointed the American Commissioner for the land survey of the 49th parallel from the Gulf of Georgia to the summit of the Rocky Mountains and the water boundary through the San Juan Islands and Straits of Juan de Fuca to the Pacific Ocean.

John Summerfield Hawkins was born on Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1816. Leaving the island at age 10 he attended private schools in England, graduating from the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich. Commissioned to the Royal Engineers in 1834, he began a military career that would span 47 years, serving in Ceylon, Australia, North America, Barbados and Ireland. In 1858 he was appointed her Majesty's Commissioner for the British North American Boundary Survey and thus began his experiences with Mr. Archibald Campbell.

Water Boundary:

Campbell reached what would be his base camp at Semiahmoo (far northwestern corner of Washington State) in June of 1857, and immediately met with his British counterparts for the water boundary, Captains James Charles Prevost, and George Henry Richards, both of the Royal Navy. They soon disagreed on which channel separated the mainland and Vancouver Island. This disagreement escalated into what was called the "Pig War" in the San Juan Islands, which is a topic for another column.

Land Boundary:

Since Campbell could not continue his survey of the water boundary, he decided to begin the land survey instead of waiting for the British land contingent to arrive. (Hawkins would not arrive until 1858 getting a late start and being laid up in Rio de Janeiro because of a broken propeller on the steamship bringing the Royal Engineers to Esquimalt (their headquarters near Victoria).

The Americans worked on their own from June of 1857 until Hawkins and the Royal Engineers arrival in June of 1858. The first meeting between the two Commissioners in August 1858 at Semiahmoo immediately resulted in disagreement. Hawkins wished to cut out the entire boundary and mark it with iron monuments. Campbell disagreed because of cost, but did agree that the boundary shall be "marked where it crosses streams of any size, permanent trails or any striking natural features". This marking consisted of erecting large stone cairns and "cutting a track of not less than 20 feet in width on each side for the distance of half a mile or more according to circumstances". Also, Campbell's commission only went to the summit of the

Rocky Mountains whereas the commission of Hawkins extended to the eastern base of those mountains.

Work continued along the boundary west of the Cascade Mountains during 1858 and 1859, the Americans from their base camp at Semiahmoo (actually located north of the 49th parallel) and the British from Esquimalt. While it would be nice to say that they worked together, in truth they rarely saw one another, the surveyors and astronomers “leap frogging” from one section of the boundary to the next. The second meeting of Campbell & Hawkins in April, 1859 (also at Semiahmoo) resulted in Campbell refusing to sign the minutes of that meeting because of Hawkins’ refusal to adopt some of Campbell’s points. Both camps moved to eastern Washington during 1860 (the British camp was at Fort Colville, just north of the Hudson’s Bay Company fort near the mouth of the Kettle River and the American camp at Harney Depot about 12 miles away. The third and final meeting (while in the field) between the two at Harney Depot (just north of present day Colville, Washington) was evidently more cordial and “characterized by harmony and moderation and formed a marked contrast” to previous meetings.

What were the two Commissioners like?

It was said that Mr. Campbell “could be stubborn to the point of perverse” and downright insulting and that Colonel Hawkins “tended to be pompous, stood on his honor and complained too much” and was very impractical at times (he wanted to mark the boundary with 500 pound iron monuments). I have relied upon written records of the surveyors that worked with them, together with copies of correspondence between the two gentlemen. In a letter to Col. Hawkins in June, 1859, Campbell rubbed in the fact that the Americans were a year ahead of the British contingent with comments like “from the limited observations you have made since your arrival” and “I take the liberty... of reminding you that the U.S. Commission is several astronomical stations in advance of the British Commission.” Commenting that he wished to open up trails “but not finding any of your parties in a position to render ... aid, we undertook the work alone. You will thus perceive that while you are prepared to consider the best means of... opening (a trail) along the parallel to the Columbia (River), we are undertaking it.” Becoming unnecessarily insulting, he goes on to state “for some wise purpose, it has been our privilege to become the pioneers in this Herculean task” and were “likely to enjoy this privilege until we reach the Rocky Mountains.” In a rare attack on any Commission’s ability to perform the work, Hawkins accused the American’s assistant surveyor (Joseph Harris) and chief topographer (Henry Custer) as being “ignorant of what they are really about” and whether “the work in their hands appertains to our presumed joint operations or not”.

In another letter to Hawkins, Campbell blasted the man who would become British Columbia’s first surveyor general, James Trutch. Because Campbell would not even give preliminary copies of the American commission’s work to Washington Territory’s Surveyor General (James Tilton) he was outraged that “a copy of the map furnished you” was “seen in the possession of Mr. Trutch, a contractor for surveying public lands in British Columbia, a gentleman whose gratitude to the United States was exhibited by abusing the U.S. Commissioner, while enjoying the fruits of the labors of the U.S. Commission for alleged incivilities to members of his parties because he (Campbell) did not get out of bed at six o’clock in the morning to point out to the said member the Initial Point of the 49th Parallel and the line itself.” (Mr. Trutch was looking for what would become boundary monument number 5 and the initial point of British Columbia’s Coast Meridian.) In spite of Mr. Campbell’s assessment, James Trutch (besides being British Columbia’s first surveyor general) went on to a very honorable and distinguished career as a civil engineer and surveyor.

A review of Colonel Hawkin's reports to his foreign office indicate that he used more tact when talking about Mr. Campbell, but his frustration shows, complaining that "I must here state that on more than one occasion references to the views... of the British Government were not received with strict courtesy and the U.S. Commissioner shewed (sp) little or no desire to allow them any weight..." Hawkins writes of exercising "untiring patience in conducting my communications with the U.S. Commissioner". By all accounts, Mr. Campbell was a stubborn man.

What did the Surveyors and Astronomers from both sides think of them?

My review of the private correspondence of Samuel Anderson (surveyor for the British Commission), the journal of George Clinton Gardner (son of Charles Gardner, second surveyor general for the Oregon Territory) and the autobiography of Joseph Harris (both surveyors for American Commission) tell us that both field parties did not relish field visits from their respective Commissioners. Space does not allow me to quote from their material.

I cannot end this column without commenting on the relationship between the actual surveyors and astronomers of both boundary commissions. In spite of the conflict between the two Commissioners, the exact opposite was true of the other members. All correspondence I have researched to date indicates the surveyors and astronomers on both sides, without exception, praised each other's ability and work and got along very well when they did meet in the field.

Archibald Campbell went on to serve as the U.S. Commissioner for the 1872-1874 survey of the 49th parallel from the summit of the Rocky Mountains to the northwesternmost point of the Lake of the Woods. He died on July 27, 1887 at Washington D.C. at the age of 74.

In 1872 Colonel John Summerfield Hawkins "declined" the offer to once again work with Mr. Campbell as the British Commissioner for the above 1872-1874 survey. He continued his service with the Royal Engineers until 1874. In 1881 he was given the rank of General and was knighted by the Queen. Sir John Summerfield Hawkins died in 1895 at Malvern, England at the age of 78.