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Manitoba Service Centers in the Early Settlement Period

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ABSTRACT—The pattern of service centers in Manitoba in 1872 and in 1886 is examined. Although a high correlation between transportation nodality and importance of service center is evident, this nodality is apparently a concomitant of service-center growth rather than a prime cause. The ideas of groups and individuals involved in promoting service-center growth seems to be the key to understanding this growth.

On the North American continent, service centers appeared more or less concomitantly with settlement, and transportation nodality was of major significance in the appearance and growth of such centers. This paper attempts to explain the growth of Manitoba’s service centers during the first settlement period. The year 1872 marked roughly the start of the first major wave of settlement in the province and is the first year for which data on postal revenue and homesteading are available. Prior to 1872, the inhabitants of the province were descended from either French Canadians or European immigrants. After 1872, most new settlements were started by persons from Ontario. The year 1886 marked roughly the end of the first wave of settlement. Immigration to the province actually declined most seriously in 1884, and it remained low until 1896; census material is available only for 1886 and 1891. Figures on postal revenue are continuous only to 1887. An examination of the service-center patterns in 1872 and in 1886 forms the basis for the discussion of factors affecting service-center growth.

Postal revenue is used to measure the importance of service centers. It is contended that the postal revenue of a particular center measures both the internal factors of population and amount of business transacted, and the external factors of a center’s ability to attract people to its hinterland. Postal revenue appears to correlate highly with population and number of services in a center, but the paucity of data on population and number of services makes a definitive statement impossible. Population figures are available only for incorporated centers, and on data services are generally incomplete; neither are available for a series of years. It is contended that postal figures are as good indices of growth as either of the other two measurements. They are readily available and complete, making them admirably suited to the present study. The possible complaint that they are unsuitable for temporal studies because of changes in the value of dollars seems to have no validity because postal rates did not change. A major problem, however, is the tendency for changes in the organization of the postal service to lag behind changes in other services, but usually such a lag is in the nature of a few months and is minimized by the use of yearly data.

The map of postal revenue in 1872 (Fig. 1) shows the two most important features of the service-center pattern at the time—the predominance of Fort Garry (Winnipeg) and the riverine location of almost all service centers. Both features are the result of cultural-historical forces operating in a particular physical environment.

The 1872 pattern had its roots in the fur-trade period, although the pattern did not emerge until after 1812. Prior to 1812, the only whites in the area were trappers and traders. Transportation was mostly on the rivers, thus it was on rivers that the first forts were established. One of these was Fort Garry, established at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers in the eighteenth century. After 1812, when settlers began arriving and taking up land nearby, the Fort became increasingly important until, in 1823, it was made the headquarters for the fur trade of the whole Canadian West. The first settlers chose land near the Fort; later settlement followed the rivers, clinging closely to the banks. Only the land immediately on the river had been bartered from the Indians, and the river was the main highway, winter and summer. The natural levees along the river were generally immune to flooding and to the annual prairie fires, and they supported an abundant growth of trees for fuel, building material, and shelter. Only after the river-front lands were almost all occupied did the population begin to spread back from the rivers. Fort Garry, therefore, enjoyed a more or less central position within the populated area. Routes between the Canadian West and Europe or Eastern Canada, whether via Hudson Bay, Lake of the Woods, or St. Paul, all passed through Fort Garry, which served as a sort of wholesaling center. The Fort’s transportation and population nodality made it the most attractive place for the establishment of new services, particularly those of which the small population...
could support only one (for example, the newspaper begun there in 1859). The center attained a sufficient advantage over other centers so that a “snowballing” effect took place. Its advantage of size attracted people, services, and transportation routes, further increasing the advantage of size.

Other service centers were insignificant by comparison. The three larger ones (Portage la Prairie, Lower Fort Garry, and Pembina) offered few services and had little transportation nodality. The other post offices (Fig. 1) had at most one store associated with them and represented incipient rather than actual service centers. There were a number of Hudson Bay Company trading posts other than those in the four largest centers, but as none had a post office and data are incomplete on their location, they have not been shown.

In the 14 years following 1872, settlement and railways spread over most of the southern part of Manitoba (Fig. 2) and the pattern of service centers was considerably altered (Fig. 4). In 1886, Winnipeg was still as dominant as it had been in 1872, but the number of secondary centers had increased greatly. The riverine location of large centers was much less apparent in 1886, inasmuch as most new centers were located on smaller streams, and almost every moderate- to large-sized center was located on a railway. Small centers, many of them nothing more than a store and a post office, were ubiquitous throughout the settled area.

The site factor of an established center, particularly one that had a considerable size advantage over its neighbors, was of the greatest significance in explaining the continued dominance of Winnipeg and the impressive growth of Portage la Prairie and Emerson (formerly Pembina). The snowballing effect that had added to Fort Garry's growth before 1872 continued. Decisions to build railways to Winnipeg, to move to Winnipeg, or to set up a business there were all mutually supporting in that each gave added reason for more such decisions. Winnipeg's continued dominance should be evaluated in these terms, even though in 1886 its apparent advantage was its transportation nodality based on railways (Fig. 4). Throughout the period of its growth, its size advantage relative to other centers was so great it gave Winnipeg a disproportionate attraction despite its location on the periphery of the population cluster in the province. The importance of relative size advantage is amply dem-

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MANITOBA SETTLEMENT AND RAILWAYS: EXPANSION TO 1886

Figure 2
POSTAL REVENUE - 1872 TO 1886
FOR SELECTED MANITOBA CENTERS

Figure 3
onstrated by the failure of Lower Fort Garry, which was very small relative to Winnipeg, and by the success of Portage la Prairie and Emerson, which were the largest local centers at the outset. However, even the relative size advantage was not a sufficient condition for continued growth when other locational factors were particularly adverse. Thus Emerson, located on the very edge of the population cluster, was not able to exert sufficient attraction to prevent the construction of a railway to the Morden area that bypassed Emerson completely and halted the town's growth (Fig. 4). The postal revenue for all centers declined after 1882 because of the recession following the collapse of a speculative boom in the province, but Emerson's decline began earlier and was still in progress in 1886 (Fig. 3).

The snowballing effect does not appear to have been important in any other service centers in the province. Centers tended somewhat to be larger in the areas first settled, but new centers developed so rapidly that older centers were not able to gain sufficient initial advantage over nearby centers to be able to profit from the snowballing effect.

Probably the main factor disrupting the early pattern was the placement and timing of railway construction. The largest service centers were on the oldest railway line (from Winnipeg west via Brandon); centers on the line northwest from Portage la Prairie and on the line from Winnipeg to Deloraine were of moderate size; and centers on the newest line just south of the Assiniboine River were the smallest (Figs. 2 and 4). The failure to get a railway generally spelled disaster for proposed or existing centers, just as late arrival caused retardation of development. The town of Nelson, one of the four largest centers in the province in 1882, lost its function (and incidentally most of its houses) to the new railway station at Morden (Fig. 3). Numerous smaller, but aspiring, centers disappeared or moved to the railway. Some centers in existence before the railway were able to remain stationary and still get railway connections by paying bonuses to the railway to pass through the town. Four centers were originally unable to get railway connections, but apparently the inhabitants did not give up hope and did not leave. Two of them, Rapid City and Selkirk, got rail connections late in 1886, but the other two, Carmen and Souris, had to wait longer. It is not clear what motivated the group decisions (in reality a summation of individual decisions) to move to the railway, to bonus the railway, or to wait for railway connections at some later date, but it appears that further investigation along these lines would prove fruitful.

The riverine location of all centers was not a purely fortuitous location on streams; invariably the locations were at points where a major land transportation route crossed or touched the stream. (Manitou was the only large center not on a stream, but its growth was associated with its location at railhead serving southwestern Manitoba for two years.) This is logical enough in terms of the importance of transportation to continued growth, but it appears that such a site was in a sense a growth factor. The larger the stream and the more important

![Figure 4](image-url)
the route, the larger the center at the crossing. In some instances, the growth reflected some special site value for the technology of the time. Thus, almost all the centers northwest of Portage la Prairie (and numerous others besides) were first important as sites for saw and grist mills, and much later growth could be attributed to the snowballing effect. At Brandon, however, the river does not appear ever to have been used as a power source, yet growth was so rapid that the snowballing effect could not have been very relevant. Contemporary businessmen seem to have attached great significance to the site itself—the point where the transcontinental railway crossed the Assiniboine River. Only Broad Valley, two miles to the east and at one time regarded as the probable crossing site, experienced a growth comparable to Brandon’s (Fig. 3), but businessmen abandoned Broad Valley when it failed to get a railway station. A number of other centers on the railway had a situation as central to population as Brandon’s, but none of them was ever seriously considered as a possible competitor by contemporary businessmen. The implication seems to be that there was a widespread belief that large cities grow at river crossings. In Brandon’s case the premise seems to have been self-fulfilling—people believed it would be a large city so they moved there and it became a city. The city’s transportation nodality (Fig. 4) was essential to maintaining the city’s relative size, but most of Brandon’s growth occurred before this nodality existed (or at least while it was coming into existence).

Then how important was transportation nodality as a causal factor in service-center growth in general? It is true that transportation nodality (as measured by postal routes—Fig. 4) was greatest for the largest centers and least for the smallest. However, there is reason to believe that much of the transportation nodality was as much a result as a cause; the snowballing effect discussed above represents a concomitant growth and interaction of service center and transportation routes. Furthermore, the choice of postal revenue as a measure of centrality was predicated upon its usefulness in measuring, among other things, the center’s attraction to the people in its hinterlands—in essence, upon its transportation nodality. By definition, then the center and its relation to its hinterland are intimately related and act as causal factors on one another, but the real question seems to be, “What are the factors producing the center and its transportation nodality?”

It appears from the foregoing, then, that “explanations” of the growth of service centers should not be carried on entirely in terms of the usual factors of site and situation per se. Only in a very limited sense do they explain growth. Of much greater explanatory significance is not the site and situational factors themselves, but the contemporary view of them. Service centers do not “grow” in the organic sense of the word; they are, rather, the product of tens, hundreds, and thousands of individual decisions. These decisions are a product of the cultural milieu and reflect the biases and knowledge of the group as a whole.

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