What Happened After the Victory Point Record was Written?

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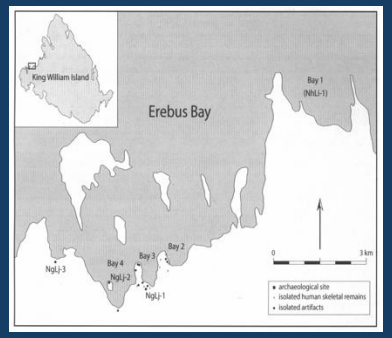
Captain Sir John Franklin
(The Guardian 2023)

May 19th, 1845, 129 men including the captain, Sir John Franklin, set sail on the HMS *Erebus* (co-captained by James Fitzjames) and the HMS *Terror* (captained by Francis Crozier) for the Northwest Passage. During the winter of 1845-1846, Franklin and his crew camped on Beechey Island, where three men had died. In April 1848, the men had deserted their ships and wrote the Victory Point Record, and what happened after that is a mystery. The question that remains to this day is, what happened after the Victory Point Record was written?

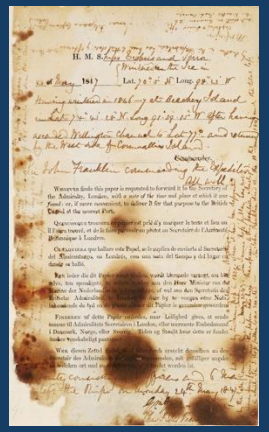
Map of Franklin Disaster Area
(Dwyer 2023)

The distance that these men planned to travel was no small feat, and they needed provisions. The men shaved down the lifeboats from the ship and placed them on sledges in order to pull their belongings through the arctic. The distance, the heavy sledges, as well as the treacherous land would have made for a near impossible journey.



Map of Erebus Bay Showcasing Three Archaeological Sites
(Stenton and Park 2017, 205)

The Boat Place is a site in Erebus Bay that was first discovered by Hobson and M'Clintock in 1859. One very important observation that M'Clintock made was that the boat was pointed N.E., meaning, it was headed towards the ships. The initial journey that the men took from the ships happened sometime between April 1848 and the fall of 1848. Despite the efforts to get to Back River, the men had to turn back and reman the ships. Three sites have been discovered in Erebus Bay, NgLj-1 (discovered in 1982, initially believed to be the original Boat Place; however, was found to be a different Boat Place), NgLj-2 (a site where Inuit claim to have seen another sledge), and NgLj-3 (the original Boat Place). Each of these sites create a Boat Place landscape. Between the years 1859-2013, an abundance of artifacts and human remains have been found at each Boat Place. The men travelled from NgLj-1 to NgLj-2 and then to NgLj-3, leaving a trail of artifacts, boats, and bodies behind them.

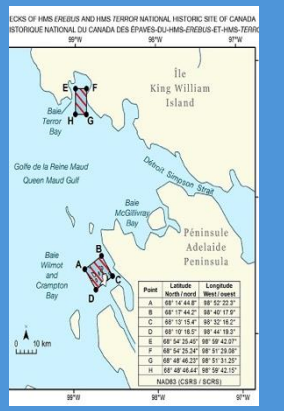


The Victory Point Record
(Raymond 2018)

In a cairn located on Victory Point, the 1859 search party (Hobson and M'Clintock) had found what is now known as the Victory Point Record. The Victory Point Record is "a standard preprinted Admiralty form with two handwritten messages" on it. (Raymond 2018). The first note was written on May 28th, 1847, and this note confirmed that all was well. The second note was written on April 25th, 1848, it stated that the ships had been stuck in the ice since September 12th, 1846, and Sir John Franklin had died on June 11th, 1847, along with eight other officers and fifteen men (M'Clintock 1859, 286). The remaining 105 souls had deserted the ships on April 22nd, 1848, and were headed for Back River (M'Clintock 1859, 287).

Goldner Food Can From King William Island
(Royal Museums Greenwich)

"There is no single reason why the expedition failed, of course; it was a deadly combination of factors. That is why there is no one answer to the question of what caused the Franklin expedition disaster" (Beattie and Geiger 2014, 241). Evidence of scurvy, tuberculosis, pneumonia, and lead poisoning have all been found in skeletal remains. In many cases, more than one of these illnesses were found in a single individual. Botulism, exhaustion, and exposure are also likely causes of death. Finally, as cannibalism and emaciation have been observed, starvation was one of the leading causes of death among crew members.



Map of King William Island and Adelaide Peninsula Displaying the Locations of the Erebus and Terror
(Parks Canada 2018)

"In 2014 a Parks Canada search team found the remains of the *Erebus* in Queen Maud Gulf and in 2016 the *Terror* was found south of King William Island" (Byard 2021, 163). These locations are not where the ships were said to have been deserted in 1848. Both ships were found in remarkable shape, especially the *Terror*. Because of the condition and the location of the ships, it appears to be quite unlikely that they simply drifted in the ice. My hypothesis is that Fitzjames and Crozier each led a group towards Back River. It is likely that these two groups had come back to the ships and had taken each ship separately, explaining why the ships were not found together. Fitzjames likely led the Boat Place party, this party taking the *Erebus*; while Crozier's party came for the *Terror*. Inuit people have known where the ships were since the men sailed them there in 1848. In fact, Inuit knowledge provided the clues that Parks Canada needed in order to locate the wrecks (Parks Canada 2018).

Map Displaying the Locations Where Franklin Expedition Remains Have Been Found
(Stenton 2018, 199)

The men that survived the Boat Place sailed the *Erebus* to Adelaide Peninsula and camped for a winter until they left in early summer. Crozier's party sailed the *Terror* to Terror Bay where they set up the Terror Camp. Inuit reports tell us that Terror Camp was where many men from this party spent their final days. The men still alive made their way south-east and had interacted with Inuit at Gladman Point around 1850. After which these men took their boats across Simpson Strait and eventually made their way to, and died off in, Starvation Cove. Based on Inuit testimony, there were men alive until at least 1850.