Ellesmere Island, North West Territories
Fort Conger Buildings

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The Fort Conger site consists of three huts built in 1900 by American engineer and explorer Robert E. Peary for use as the principal land base for his 1901-1 902 attempt to reach the North Pole. In addition to these huts there are also archaeological remains. Two of the huts are reasonably intact; the third has lost its roof and part of two walls. Parks Canada is the custodial department. See FHBRO Building Report 88-177.

Reasons For Designation

The Fort Conger buildings were designated Classified for their close association with Arctic exploration, in particular, with Peary's attempts to reach the North Pole. The Fort Conger huts are rare surviving examples of buildings associated with North Polar Exploration at the turn of the century. They are also designated for their representation of the functional adaptation of structures to the High Arctic climate, and for the integrity of the site in its remote natural setting.

The Fort Conger site on Lady Franklin Bay was the most northerly base camp used in the early explorations of the North Pole region. Expeditions to the area were led by British Captain George S. Nares in 1875-76 and American Lieutenant Adolphus Greely in 1881, both of which ended in loss of life as a result of inadequate shelter and supplies. Peary's 1898-1902 expedition was threatened in 1900 when his ship the Windward, on which he intended to spend the winter, did not arrive as expected at Fort Conger. Peary used materials from a house built on the site by the Greely expedition to construct the three extant huts, as well as a kitchen building, of which only traces remain. As a result of his study of Arctic shelters, Peary was able to combine Western materials and technology with Inuit design principles to create rudimentary, but well-insulated, structures which have survived reasonably intact for nearly a century. This fusion of ideas produced a marked improvement in the environmental adaptation of the structures over those constructed by earlier expeditions. Peary's design concept was a forerunner to a design for the construction of an emergency house in the 1940 Arctic Manual written by Vilhjalmur Stefansson for the United States Army.

While his 1901-02 attempt to reach the Pole did not succeed, he is often credited with reaching it in 1909, at which time the Fort Conger buildings served as an ancillary base for the expedition.

Although the site was also used by subsequent American, Danish and British expeditions, its turn-of-the-century character remains intact. The cluster of historic wooden structures and associated archaeological remains, located in the rugged isolated setting of northern Ellesmere Island, is a regional landmark.

Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of the three huts at Fort Conger resides in the design characteristics which facilitated their use as living quarters in a climate of extreme cold, and by the site's status as a landmark in a sparsely-populated environment.

The small scale of the structures, the use of earth, sod, and/or snow on the roof and mounded against the walls to create additional layers of insulation, the partially below-grade construction employing tunnel entrances to limit the penetration of outside

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air, and the close clustering of buildings to facilitate their interconnection by tunnels reflect Inuit design principles. The salvaged building materials - wood studs, tar paper, boards, cast-iron stoves - and the use of wood frame construction and interwall insulation represent Western building technology. The combination of these materials and design principles achieved a successful shelter design with great historic significance. Every effort should be made to ensure the continuing preservation of original material without altering the utilitarian character of the structures.

To preserve the integrity of the site and setting, the area should remain undeveloped.

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