

LOUISBOURG

The French came to Louisbourg in 1713, after ceding Acadia and Newfoundland to the British by the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession. France's only remaining possessions in what is now Atlantic Canada were the islands of Cape Breton and Prince Edward, which were then called Isle Royale and Isle Saint-Jean. The French used these islands as a base to continue the lucrative cod fishery off the Grand Banks. In 1719 they began to construct at Louisbourg a fortified town which was only completed on the eve of the first siege in 1745. The town and settlement along the harbour shore soon became a thriving community.

The cod fishery accounted for most of Isle Royale's prosperity. Dried before export, the fish was salted and laid on stages which lined the beaches of Louisbourg and its outports. Louisbourg became a hub of commerce, trading in manufactured goods and various materials imported from France, Quebec, the West Indies and New England.

One might think that the fortress would be prepared for any onslaught. Yet, while the harbour was well defended, the main landward defences were commanded by a series of low hills, some dangerously close to the fortifications. All provided excellent locations for siege batteries.

The first attack came in 1745 following a declaration of war between Britain and France. Charged with the fervour of a religious crusade, and informed that the fortress was in disrepair with its poorly supplied troops on the verge of mutiny, the New Englanders mounted an assault on Louisbourg. Within 46 days of the invasion the fortress was captured. To the chagrin of the New Englanders, only three years later the town was restored to the French by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle. In 1758 Louisbourg was besieged a second time. Without a strong navy to patrol the sea beyond its walls, Louisbourg was impossible to defend. Attacking with 13,100 troops supported by a 14,000 crew on board 150 ships, a British army captured the fortress in seven weeks. Determined that Louisbourg would never again become a fortified French base, the British demolished the fortress walls.

In 1961 the Government of Canada began a \$25million project aimed at reconstructing approximately one-quarter of the original town and fortifications. Within this area the buildings, yards, gardens and streets are being recreated as they were during the 1740s, immediately preceding Louisbourg's first siege.

The work at Louisbourg has required an inter-disciplinary research effort. Archaeological excavation has yielded millions of artifacts as well as the ruins of fortifications and buildings. Some 750,000 pages of documents and 500 maps and plans have been copied from archives in France, England, Scotland, the United States and Canada. The historical evidence reveals much about life at Louisbourg and provides an excellent base for the study of the French in North America.

Louisbourg in the Anglo-French Rivalry in North America, 1713-68

From its establishment by the French in 1713 until the withdrawal of the last British troops in 1768, Louisbourg played an important role in the Anglo-French struggle for hegemony in North America. For three decades after its founding Louisbourg enjoyed peace and prosperity, though the threat of war always hung over the fortified town. In 1745 an army of New Englanders, supported by a British naval squadron, captured Louisbourg after a 46-day siege. The town was returned to the French by treaty, and then besieged again in 1758. The assault lasted seven weeks, pitting a combined British army and naval force of 27,000 against 7,000 French defenders (soldiers and sailors). In the end the French stronghold and naval base fell again, opening the way for the British conquest of the rest of New France.

The Louisbourg Fisheries, 1713-58

The cod fishery was the foundation on which the economy of Louisbourg and Île Royale (Cape Breton) rested. The fishery, conducted both inshore and offshore, and organized into two seasons, dominated the colonial economy and was of great significance internationally. Fish, preserved by salting and drying, was an important foodstuff in Europe. Competition for fish stocks often led to international rivalries. The per capita value of Île Royale's dried cod exports in 1737 was about eight times greater than the value of Canada's fur trade during the same period. Major export markets were in France and the West Indies.

Louisbourg and its Trade, 1713-58

Thanks to its spacious, ice-free and well-protected harbour, its lucrative fishery, and its near-perfect location on the Atlantic edge of North America, Louisbourg quickly developed into an important centre of merchant trade. Ocean-going vessels from France, the West Indies, and Canada - and coastal ships from New England and Acadia - used Louisbourg as a trade and transshipment centre. An average of 150 vessels a year sailed into Louisbourg harbour, making it the busiest seaport in New France and one of the busiest in North America. Louisbourg's importance as a trading centre was demonstrated by its many warehouses, careening wharf, admiralty court, harbour defences and what was Canada's first lighthouse.

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Society and Culture at Louisbourg, 1713-68

In its heyday Louisbourg was a town of several thousand inhabitants. It was a major colonial settlement on the Atlantic edge of North America. Though part of New France, Louisbourg society differed from that of the French communities along the St. Lawrence River. Its economic orientations, demographic composition and geographical location created a society that was distinctive within the context of New France. There was no seigneurial regime, the fur trade was negligible, the institutional power of the church was minimal, males greatly outnumbered females, and there were numbers of non-French peoples (mostly Basques, German and Swiss) living and working alongside the French majority. Nonetheless, the colony's cultural life was very much a part of overall French civilization. Louisbourg was not in the hands of the French for this entire period, however. Twice, the English occupied the fortress, from 1745-49 and 1758-68. They too brought their societal traditions and culture with them.

Preservation and Commemoration, 1767-1980

In the nearly two and a half centuries since Louisbourg was captured in 1758 the fortress' history has been officially commemorated more than a dozen times, and in many different ways. The first monument was erected in 1767 by the British. In the years that followed, a series of plaques, cairns and other statuary have been erected to mark different aspects of the history of the place. Various private societies have raised monuments and the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada has, at different times, put up six different plaques. During the 1930s a museum was built and ruins and streets were uncovered. Beginning in the 1960s, nearly one-quarter of the original walled town was fully reconstructed. This initiative which required in-depth, inter-disciplinary research, is a model that has had great influence on the Canadian heritage field. It has also produced an historical and archaeological data base on one particular 18th-century settlement that offers an unrivalled "window on the past."