Nova Scotia

Fortress of Louisbourg
National Historic Park
Louisbourg – this great grey ghost on a bleak and rocky shore was built to save a French king’s dream of empire. The year was 1713. The War of the Spanish Succession was lost, and only the shrewdness of Louis XIV’s negotiators at Utrecht saved any of France’s coastal colonies in North America.

To England went all of Nova Scotia (Acadia), Newfoundland, and the Hudson’s Bay Company territory. Saved for France was Cape Breton Island (Isle Royale), Prince Edward Island, and the two tiny rocks called St. Pierre and Miquelon.

Alarmed at the threat to French fisheries in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the western Atlantic, as well as to her colonies inland, France belatedly determined to protect the water access to Quebec and to what lay beyond. A great fortress – Louisbourg – was planned to guard the mouth of the St. Lawrence River. The work began in 1720.

Thirty years of uneasy peace between France and England followed the Treaty of Utrecht. It gave the builders of Louisbourg time to raise the fortress and see the town it enclosed develop into a centre of commerce rivalling that of Quebec itself.

The building of the fortress was done by soldiers under the direction of two engineers, Verville and Verrier, following the principles of defence developed by the great military engineer, Vauban.

There were formidable problems to be faced at Louisbourg. The rapid thaw-freeze cycle of Atlantic springtime played havoc with the lime mortar used by the French, and the walls of Louisbourg were in need of constant repair. This problem was so acute that, during Louisbourg’s two sieges, the defences crumbled nearly as much from the shock of guns being fired on the ramparts as from the effects of enemy fire.

The choice of the site itself added to the difficulties. Much of the fortress was built on swamp. The French had to contend not only with crumbling walls and leaky roofs, but also with flooded basements. And when the rest of Cape Breton is enjoying sunshine, Louisbourg can be shrouded in fog.

Workmanship was a chronic problem to the builders of Louisbourg. The garrison soldiers employed by contractors were unskilled and their morale was low. Delays in pay, and the conditions in which they worked led to drunkenness and absenteeism.

Nor were the contractors themselves above reproach. Corruption was rife, and money meant for Louisbourg ended up in many pockets. Louis XV himself is said to have protested that he expected to waken one morning in Versailles and see the walls and towers of Louisbourg rising over the western horizon.

With such sums spent on a far-off island fortress, the myth of an “impregnable” Louisbourg was as easily believed by Parisians as it was by New Englanders. To the American colonists, Louisbourg seemed an overwhelming threat. Could they have seen it, they might have felt less threatened.

The town itself was strongly influenced by its function as a harbour for French fishing fleets, which used the port to dry their catches before shipping them to Europe. The harbour shore, cluttered with fishing shacks, as well as parts of the town itself, was given over to fish flakes. Throughout Louisbourg there hung the stench of drying codfish, mingled with more obnoxious smells; for standards of hygiene and sanitation were not high during the 18th century.

If the choice of site was unfortunate from its effect on living and working conditions, it was disastrous from the strategic point of view.

While the harbour was so well defended as to make a forced entry virtually impossible, insufficient attention was paid to the surrounding country. The main line of landward defences took advantage of a natural line of hillocks. But beyond this was a series of low hills, some of which lay dangerously close to the fortifications. All of them were excellent locations for siege batteries.
The French failed either to defend these hills or to provide the fortress with gun emplacements to command the heights, thereby contributing to their own defeat. The attack came in 1745, following the declaration of war on England by France. The people of New England raised an army to attack Louisbourg, the British navy provided transport. After 46 days of siege the "impregnable fortress" was captured. But the victory of the New Englanders was undone by the peace terms arranged by England and France at Aix-la-Chapelle. In April, 1748, Louisbourg was returned to the French. It would fall again.

In 1756 began the final struggle for the New World; it was England versus France once more. Without a strong French navy to patrol the sea beyond its walls, Louisbourg was impossible to defend. An English army led by Sir Jeffrey Amherst besieged and captured the fortress in 1756 for the second and final time. At the head of the leading assault and prominent during the siege was Brigadier-General James Wolfe, who later captured Quebec for the British. It was decided that, should the French return again as they did in 1748, no fortress would await them. The summer of 1758 was spent in blowing up its defences. The town remained, occupied by a declining number of residents, chiefly time-expired British soldiers and their families, who later built new homes and farmed among the ruins. The fortress area was set aside by the soldiers and their families, who later built new homes and farmed among the ruins. The fortress area was set aside by the King's soldiers for his use. The reconstruction of the site was used liberally as a quarry until the establishment of the park, and the present causeway to the fortress.

The fortress area was set aside by the soldiers and their families, who later built new homes and farmed among the ruins. The fortress area was set aside by the King's soldiers for his use. The restoration effort is being directed toward a Louisbourg as it was in 1745, immediately before the first siege. Then the fortress was complete and relatively new; thereafter it was in a state of unending repair and modification. Although the best historical evidence favours reconstruction of the 1745 fortresses, the archaeological excavations often bring to light structures that did not exist at the time of the first siege but were constructed between then and 1758. This makes the research task a complex one.

Once a feature at Louisbourg has been historically and archaeologically researched, a design team consisting of historians, archaeologists, draftsmen, and, at times, engineers and interpreters, produce preliminary design drawings. From these, final construction drawings are produced by draftsmen of the Engineering Section. These final drawings may range from 20 different sheets, in the case of a small building, to 50 or more for a large building. In the case of the Château St-Louis, well over 100 sheets were required. Each averages a week of drafting. Considering that the restoration will involve between 40 and 50 buildings and a series of massive defences, some idea may be gained of the tremendous design task involved.

The decision was made with the idea of providing employment for the displaced coal miners of Cape Breton. Having an immediate work force posed a problem: what the planners needed was time, not men - time for research before actual reconstruction. Initially, then, the new work force was employed in building the training and workshop facilities for the various crafts likely to be involved in the restoration. Coal miners began learning such crafts as stone cutting, stone masonry, wrought iron work, carpentry and timber hewing. Some trade skills, such as slating, had virtually disappeared in Canada. A French expert had to be brought in to aid in the intricate slating and leading on the tower of the Château St-Louis.

This period of retraining was used by historians and archaeologists to build up as much lead time as possible in the location of documents, and in the excavation of sites to be reconstructed. The archaeologists in particular found it difficult to excavate effectively in the absence of coordinated historical data on their sites. Historians, meanwhile, combed through archives and collections in Britain, France, Canada and the United States for every documentary reference to Louisbourg that could be traced. There are now some 350,000 documents, journals, maps and plans in the Louisbourg archives.

Another result of the research effort is the large and important collection of French and British artifacts excavated from the fortress site. This includes ceramics and glass of many types, clay pipes, weapons, tools, building hardware, and even toys. The historical and archaeological evidence together reveal much about life at Louisbourg, and provide an excellent base for the study of the French culture in North America.

Throughout the period from its demolition until the establishment of the park, the site was used liberally as a quarry for dressed sandstone, brick and rubble. The fortress was set aside by the soldiers and their families, who later built new homes and farmed among the ruins. The fortress area was set aside by the King's soldiers for his use. The reconstruction of the site was used liberally as a quarry until the establishment of the park, and the present causeway to the fortress, the site was used liberally as a quarry until the establishment of the park, and the present causeway to the fortress.

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The reconstruction of the Citadel consists of the King's Bastion and the Château St-Louis - began with the Bastion itself in 1963. In 1967, construction moved outside the Citadel with the building of the Magasin General, Chief Storehouse for government supplies. A number of buildings have been scheduled for reconstruction in the years ahead, and planning for development of the Park has been projected through to 1976. The Park will, however, be fully operational in the summer of 1972.
National Historic Parks

2. Fort Rodd Hill, (British Columbia) Nineteenth-century British coastal fortification with historic foghorn.
3. Vancouver, (British Columbia) The schooner, John Cabot, first vessel to navigate the Northwest Passage from West to East, built in 1698 for the R.M.R.'s Arctic patrol service. It is now part of a maritime museum.
4. Fort Vancouver, (Washington) Site of early French settlement of 1782. Other buildings were added in 1812 and later years.
5. Fort Nisqually, (Washington) Partial reconstruction of pelagic Hudson's Bay Company post of 1850's.
6. Batoche Rectory, (Saskatchewan) Headquarters of the Metis during the North West Rebellion of 1885 at Duck Lake.
7. Fort Battleford, (Saskatchewan) North West Company post built in 1826.
8. Lower Fort Garry, (Manitoba) Stone fort built by the French in 1759, rebuilt by the British in 1761.
9. Fort LaSalle, (Louisiana) Site of first American settlement in the Mississippi Valley.
10. Woodside, (Ontario) At Kitchener, the boyhood home of William Lyon Mackenzie, first prime minister of Canada.
12. Fort Wellington, (Ontario) At Prescott, defence post built between 1812-1814, with restored blockhouse dating from the 1800's.
13. Coteau-du-Lac, (Quebec) Late 18th-century British military post and site of first canal on the St. Lawrence River at Coteau-du-Lac.
15. Fort Chambly, (Quebec) Fort first built by French in 1696 was destroyed by the British and rebuilt between 1700-1711. It was occupied by the Americans and British. At Chambly, about 19 miles southeast of Montreal.
16. Fort Lennox, (Quebec) On Isle-aux-Noix in the Richelieu River near St. Jean, an inland fort, first permanent settlement begun in 1634, after the Conquest of New France in 1760. Other buildings were added in 1812 and later years.
19. Fort Amherst, (Prince Edward Island) At Rocky Harbour, residence of Robert Catesby, a leader of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.
20. Grand Pré, (Nova Scotia) Evangeline Chapel and museum stands near the village where the principal events in the expulsion of the Acadians took place.
21. Halifax Citadel, (Nova Scotia) Nineteenth-century stone fortress, one of the largest in North America, contains three museum pavilions relating to Canada's naval, military, and provincial history.
26. Signal Hill, (Newfoundland) Rocky headland at entrance to St. John's harbour. Site of numerous historic events including the Seven Years' War in North America. Includes John Cabot Memorial Tower.

Louisbourg and Vicinity

Fortress Area

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