

1987 FIELDWORK AT RED BAY, LABRADOR

James A. Tuck
Archaeology Unit
Memorial University of Newfoundland

The summer of 1987 saw continued work at archaeological sites at Red Bay, Labrador, along the north shore of the Strait of Belle Isle. The project was funded by the Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. A crew of ten was in the field on June 1, the full crew of 34 operated between June 29 and August 29, and a smaller crew throughout the month of September and into October. Once again the Canadian Conservation Institute provided support during the field season and continuing conservation services following the excavations.

Work continued at the locations of several sixteenth century sites on Saddle Island and, for the first time, a major effort was made on the mainland within the community of Red Bay. During the last month of the field season two structures located on the west side of "The Basin", opposite the community of Red Bay, and apparently dating from the eighteenth century, were tested.

Saddle Island

Several weeks were spent testing areas immediately adjacent to the cemetery on the south end of Saddle Island where five

graves were found during 1986 (Tuck, n.d.). No additional burials were found, but the excavations did reveal further evidence of Middle Dorset presence, entirely in the form of stone tools and weapons. Another small excavation was carried out adjacent to the tryworks excavated in 1981 and 1982 (Tuck, 1982; 1983). Two concentrations of roofing tiles were found on a small terrace north and west of the tryworks. Both areas produced nails, ceramics and fragments of glass; the area nearest the tryworks produced a single cask hook or head vise, a device used by coopers to place the centre pieces in casks during construction. It is conceivable, therefore, that this area represents a cooperage, but one that was little used and hence contained very little refuse. Organic preservation was entirely lacking.

At Saddle Island West, a large site located south of the lighthouse wharf, investigation of both sixteenth century whaling features and contemporaneous native occupations continued. The large tryworks described in an earlier report (Tuck, n.d.), was excavated more fully. The six stone fireboxes which once supported the copper cauldrons were defined and proved to be of a somewhat unusual nature. As far as excavations have gone to date, they have revealed what at first glance appear to be oblong, almost rectangular fireboxes measuring nearly two metres

long by slightly over one metre in width. Excavation is not complete, but it is believed that this unusual appearance may have resulted from a complete rebuilding of the stonework within the wood framed structure which protected the tryworks.

As is usually the case with the tryworks, the excavations produced little in the way of artifacts. Exceptions were the distal portion of an iron harpoon, broken about mid-shaft, and a large copper oil lamp with provision for four wicks. The former appeared to have been incorporated into the stonework of the tryworks itself, although for what reason no explanation can be offered. The lamp was found outside of the tryworks, beneath the collapsed roof. The provision for four wicks suggests that it may have lighted a substantial space, perhaps the tryworks itself.

Excavations also revealed a second, much smaller tile roof fall and what appears to be a small dwelling site. The former is located adjacent to the tryworks and, judging by the tile roof (such roofs seem to characterize only industrial buildings), the structure must relate to the production of oil, barrel manufacture, or some other industrial activity. The roof fall has been mapped and will be removed in 1988 to attempt to determine the function of the structure.

The small living site located to the south of the tryworks, between the main industrial buildings and what appears to be a wharf, perhaps the location where flensing took place. Numerous strips of baleen surrounding a small hearth are all that remains of the structure itself, which was apparently of the same insubstantial construction that typifies most living sites associated with the whaling period. Artifacts found within the structure are also typical of living sites recorded elsewhere on Saddle Island. They included a few sherds of coarse earthenware and fragments of fine glass, probably from a drinking glass, as well as a complete Normandy stoneware cup (Figure 1) and a small bronze finger ring bearing a heart-like motif (Figure 2), resembling a signet ring.

Despite the rebuilding of the stonework within the tryworks, the shore station at Saddle Island West does not appear to have been intensively used. Indeed, this appears to have been the case at several of the shore stations excavated during the last decade. When the intensity of use is compared with the suitability of their locations for the processing of whales, a pattern begins to emerge: the least intensively used shore stations are invariably located in areas which must have presented some difficulties in flensing or rendering whales.

On Organ's Island (Tuck, n.d.) the stonework of the tryworks displayed only minimal evidence of burning, and artifacts and other refuse were virtually absent, indicating that the shore station was in use for only a very short period of time. The site possesses several disadvantages: the water in front of the tryworks is extremely shallow and whales could not have been manoeuvred near the shore station for flensing and the location faces the northeast and is vulnerable to the frequent and violent winds from that direction. However, if blackflies were as much as a problem 400 years ago as they are today, the wind must have been welcomed by the on-shore workers, for the place is almost unbearable on windless days.

Saddle Island West is somewhat more sheltered, but also fronts extremely shallow water. If the wharf mentioned above was part of this shore station, the blubber must have been carried something like 100 metres from the wharf to the tryworks. Several other little-used shore stations are located in similarly unsuitable areas.

This information makes it possible to date, at least relatively, the little-used shore stations situated at unfavourable locations. It seems reasonable to assume that unsuitable locations were chosen only because the better locations -- those which provided adequate shelter and deep water

-- were already occupied. That these more suitable locations were repeatedly and intensively utilized is amply demonstrated by the initial excavations on the mainland, which are described below. This, in turn, suggests that the lesser-used shore stations were constructed and used during the peak period of Basque whaling in southern Labrador, probably between the 1650s and early 1580s.

Excavations at Saddle Island West also provided additional evidence of Indian, and perhaps recent Inuit, occupation at Saddle Island West. The number of completely exposed Indian hearths which occupy the sheltered basin in which the site is located now total nearly fifty. Test pits indicate that many more such hearths remain to be exposed; it will not be surprising if the total eventually exceeds one hundred. The newly-discovered hearths do not contradict the earlier conclusion that they were made during the same years as the Basques occupied Saddle Island West. The artifacts recovered in 1987 duplicate those found in the previous season, although some new forms add to the inventory of artifacts used by the Recent Indian people of southern Labrador.

Projectile points are small corner-notched or expanding stemmed forms which resemble contemporaneous examples from the central Labrador coast, the Island of Newfoundland and the north

shore in adjacent Quebec. They are made from both Ramah chert and a variety of fine-grained greenish-grey cherts. Un-notched bifaces are of approximately the same dimensions and form as the projectile points and are made from the same materials. These two forms and small scrapers made on random flakes comprise the majority of the chipped stone artifacts. A large Ramah chert side scraper found during the past summer is also a product of the same Recent Indian people.

Fragments of two ceramic vessels were also found associated with the Recent Indian hearths. Both are tempered with coarse grit and appear to be underfired, for the thick walls are severely delaminated and friable. The sherds appear to pertain to small, thick vessels, possibly with conical bases. The more complete of the two has a castellated rim with exterior decoration consisting of three rows of horizontal impressed (?) lines on an incipient collar set off by from the neck by a horizontal row of oblique impressions. The neck is decorated by oblique plaits of cord-wrapped paddle (?) impressions (Figure 3). The second vessel has a row of oblique impressions below the rim, and oblique, criss-cross and horizontal incised lines on the neck (Figure 4).

The underfired nature and thick paste of the vessels compare with ceramics reported by Loring (1985:128) from the central

Labrador coast, although the central Labrador examples specimens lacked any trace of decoration. Whether these ceramics represent an incipient local tradition, or are imports from somewhere up the St. Lawrence, is not presently known.

A small, nearly square sod house located a few metres from the tryworks, and well within the area of Indian occupation was partly excavated. It consists of low sod walls which contain numerous fire-broken stones and occasional artifacts removed with the sods that were used to construct the building. The entrance appears to lie to the southwest, away from the water but sheltered from the northerly winds. A portion of a raised (?) platform composed of large, flat rocks may, if the house proves to be of Inuit origin, represent a sleeping platform.

The cultural attribution is far from certain, however, for no items of native manufacture have been found within the house or in the refuse deposits which surround the entrance. The material consists primarily of ceramics, nails and other iron objects and a surprising number of green glass liquor bottles, all dating from the mid-nineteenth century.

Excavations on the Mainland

On the mainland, in the Community of Red Bay, excavations begun during 1986 were expanded and an adjacent area nearer the shore explored. The sites located to the south of the Memorial University field laboratory, on the opposite side of the small shallow embayment known as "the strand". One of the shipwrecks located by the Parks Canada divers (Stevens, 1975:172) lies a few metres offshore from this area.

Stages and stores crowd the shoreline today, because of the sheltered nature of the area and the presence of a steeply-sloping bottom which provides easy access to the stages. These two factors -- deep water and shelter -- made this area a preferred location for whaling stations during the sixteenth century, as it is for fishing premises at the present time. This is also abundantly clear even from the preliminary excavations conducted during 1987.

The excavations begun in 1986 and continued in 1987 took place on a level terrace overlooking the second area of exploration. Clear evidence of the former presence of substantial structures at this area is indicated by a thick layer of shattered roof tile, numerous nails and spikes and occasional fragments of waterlogged wood and baleen which were probably parts of the structure(s). The location of this area matches the locations of cooperages excavated on Saddle Island. Coopers'

tools, including an adze, head vises and gimlets, confirm the former presence of at least one cooperage in the area. The presence of a truly prodigious amount and variety of other refuse suggests that the structures in this area were in use for a long period, perhaps throughout the entire Basque whaling episode. Ceramic and glassware fragments exceed the number recovered in any single previous year, and probably in several years combined.

Excavations nearer the water's edge, below the cooperage(s) revealed a complex of tryworks, not yet completely unravelled, which also indicates the intensive utilization of this area throughout the whaling period. Test pits indicate that virtually every piece of suitable land supported a tryworks at one time or another. In the single area selected for intensive excavation, these rendering features are literally stacked atop one another. The earliest examples, built directly on bedrock or the ground surface, were levelled when they became unsuitable for use and another type of tryworks built in roughly the same location. In the single area excavated this appears to have happened on at least three occasions. Since the earlier examples were deliberately levelled, and filled in with whatever was on hand, chances are excellent for the preservation of organics and other materials. Hopefully, excavations during the coming summers will

reveal some of this material and, perhaps, provide some indications of changes in the tryworks and rendering process during the course of the sixteenth century.

An Eighteenth Century Site

During the latter part of August a stone mound discovered during a previous Historical Resources Overview Assessment was investigated. It proved to be a collapsed rock and clay chimney which can be dated, provisionally at least, to the first half of the eighteenth century. This determination is based upon a small sample of smoking pipe bowls and stems, hand-forged nails with large, flat heads, and the absence of ceramics dating to the post 1750 period.

Preliminary indications are that the structure might have burned, which leads to speculation that it may have been the habitation of a Quebec merchant, Pierre Constantin. He established a post at Red Bay in 1715 which was burned by the Inuit in 1718 with the loss of three of the post's inhabitants. The post was rebuilt in 1719 and lasted until at least the 1730s. A second collapsed chimney lies a short distance from that tested and could conceivably be the remains of the second habitation.

The centreline of the new Red Bay road, now under construction, passed directly through the first chimney fall to be uncovered. Mr. Roger Pottle, of the Department of Transportation, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, was contacted and within a few days a plan to alter the course of the road was approved, thereby avoiding both structures. Additional work at both sites is planned for the summer and fall of 1988.

Tourism in 1987

A final aspect of the Red Bay project which might be mentioned is that of tourism. Well over 2,000 people, from eleven Canadian provinces, and 38 of the United States and eight other countries, visited Red Bay during the summer of 1987. This represents an increase of approximately 600% from 1984 when records were first kept. Many of these visitors came specifically to see the site, and many visitors from past years returned to see what progress had been made since their last visit. I think that there is an important message here for those concerned with the development of historic sites. Despite an enlarged and improved exhibit of artifacts, and walkways which allow controlled visitor access to areas previously excavated, the major attraction to visitors continues to be the opportunity

to watch excavations in progress and witness the cleaning, conservation and restoration of archaeological specimens.

It seems to me, therefore, that the traditional practice of conducting archaeological investigations at a historic site, waiting several years while analysis is done, then creating an interpretation centre of some sort, is missing an important opportunity to both attract tourists and to teach them something about the process of archaeology. Public interpretation of important sites, particularly those accessible to the general public, should be considered as part of archaeological projects from the very start of investigations. Interpretive programmes should be designed to give visitors an opportunity to see first-hand the process of archaeology -- how objects and features are recovered, conserved and restored, and how archaeologists arrive at their conclusions from this information. This is sometimes a time-consuming process, but in the long run is well worth the effort. In the last analysis it is the general public whose tax dollars support most archaeology. If the sample of visitors with whom I have talked at Red Bay is any indication, people who visit excavations invariably come away with the feeling that they have got something for their money.

REFERENCES CITED

Loring, Stephen

1985

Archaeological investigations into the nature of the late prehistoric Indian occupation in Labrador: a report on the 1984 field season. In, Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador 1984, edited by J.S. Thomson and C. Thomson, pp. 122-153. Historic Resources Division, Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth. St. John's.

Stevens, Willis

1985

Progress report on the marine excavations at Red Bay, Labrador: a summary of the 1983

field season. In, Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador 1984, edited by J.S. Thomson and C. Thomson, pp. 166-189. Historic Resources Division, Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth. St. John's.

Tuck, James, A.

1982 Fieldwork at Red Bay, Labrador. In, Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador 1981, edited by J.S. Thomson and C. Thomson, pp. 56-67. Historic Resources Division, Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth. St. John's.

1983 Excavations at Red Bay, Labrador - 1982. In, Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador 1982, edited by J.S. Thomson and C. Thomson, pp.95-117. Historic Resources Division, Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth. St. John's.

n.d. Archaeology at Red Bay, Labrador -1986
(CALLUM IS THIS THE CORRECT TITLE ?) In

press, Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador 1986, edited by C. Thomson. Historic Resources Division, Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth. St. John's.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Small Normandy stoneware cup or mug found at a small sixteenth century living site at Saddle Island West. Photo by Jack Martin.

Figure 2. The bezel of a bronze finger ring found at a small sixteenth century Basque living site at Saddle Island West. Photo by W. Bokman, Canadian Conservation Institute.

Figure 3. Rim sherd of a sixteenth century native ceramic vessel from Saddle Island West. photo by jack martin.

Figure 4. Rim sherd of a sixteenth century native ceramic vessel from Saddle Island West. Photo by Jack Martin.