

ARCHAEOLOGY AT RED BAY, LABRADOR 1988
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The 1988 field season at Red Bay, Labrador was supported by the Historic Resources Division, Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth; conservation assistance was again provided, both during and after the field season, by the Canadian Conservation Institute. Work commenced with a small crew in early June, a full crew conducted investigations during the months of July and August and a reduced crew continued work during the month of September.

Excavations were concentrated at: a) the sixteenth century whaling shore station and Recent Indian and other Native occupation areas at the Saddle Island West site; b) an extensive complex of tryworks associated with a cooperage explored during 1986 and 1987 and located on the mainland in the southeastern part of the Community of Red Bay; and c) at what appear to be two small European(?) dwellings located on the west side of The Basin and presumed to have been associated with the habitation of the Quebec entrepreneur Pierre Constantin and dating from the first half of the eighteenth century. Brief descriptions of each area of excavation follow.

Saddle Island West

The two foci of excavations at this site were to investigate further the tryworks and, particularly, associated roof falls which were suspected to have been derived from associated structures and

to expose additional Native hearths and occupation areas to the west and north of the tryworks.

The former of these two objectives was met, that is the roof falls were mapped, photographed and removed, but no additional trace of structures in the form of post molds or other structural elements was recovered. It still seems as if the roof fall to the south of, and clearly discrete from, the tryworks roof fall represents a separate structure. A shallow culture layer was preserved in areas where the soil had not been trenched for gardening, but aside from a few sherds of coarse earthenware no artifacts suggestive of activities, other than the coopers' head vise or cask hook recovered in 1987 (Tuck n.d.) were recovered. The location of this structure, however, particularly when compared with the much better preserved structure found at Area J on Saddle Island (Tuck 1985:227) suggests that it, too, may have served to house the labourers who operated the nearby tryworks.

Additional excavations within and directly adjacent to the tryworks itself, revealed the presence of two ditches, dug parallel to the back wall of the rendering ovens and turning downslope toward the harbour at the south end of the structure. They appear not to have figured in the industrial process but more likely served as drainage ditches, although their necessity on the well-drained sandy soil of Saddle Island West is not obvious.

Considerable additional evidence of Native occupation at Saddle Island West was revealed by the 1988 excavations. Virtually the entire level floor of the natural amphitheatre formed by a

terrace to the west contains remains of aboriginal hearths. More than 130 such features have been recorded to date^e. Most of these contain but a few flakes and little in the way of diagnostic artifacts. They appear to have been used for even shorter periods of time than those located immediately adjacent to the tryworks (Tuck n.d.).

While most of the material appears to pertain to Recent Indian occupations, at least a few objects indicate a Palaeo-Eskimo occupation of the area. Many of these were found among hearths and hearth rubble in a trench some 30 metres in length and between two and three metres in width. Evidence for the excavation of the trench was apparent in the form of sand and subsoil^{ly} piled atop old sod on the east side of the trench; similar fill mixed with sods within the trench itself suggests deliberate re-filling of the trench. How long a time lapsed between excavation and re-filling cannot be said and the function of this unusual feature awaits further excavation in 1989.

Red Bay East

Work continued at the tryworks complex initially opened in 1987 (Tuck n.d.). Stratigraphy behind the back walls of the rendering ovens indicates at least four separate rebuildings, a fact confirmed by partially dismantling the rendering ovens themselves to reveal the construction layers themselves. Rebuilding of the tryworks raised the area by more than a metre, the fill consisting of fire-broken rocks, clay, tile fragments and a number of bits of wood, some representing once-substantial timbers which

must have figured in the construction of the buildings housing the tryworks. Preservation of this wood and other organic materials, including a low-cut shoe or slipper, was remarkable, a result of infusion with whale oil spilled during subsequent rendering operations.

One interesting feature associated with this tryworks is a small (c. 7cm diameter by 4cm deep) hole in the bedrock immediately in front of the fireboxes. It shows evidence of having been produced by incomplete rotation of a heavy object. Its function remains unknown. It may have been the base of a crane or 'gin-pole' arrangement used to hoist blubber from the water to the level of the tryworks, but its proximity to the tryworks itself weakens this suggestion.

It was planned to continue to expose this tryworks and the surrounding area where wet conditions promised good organic preservation. Unfortunately at least one open sewer drains into the area and excavations cannot be continued until such time as the Red Bay water and sewer construction is completed and the area has had a chance to cleanse itself.

A second tryworks at Red Bay East was also exposed, providing some information on materials used in roof construction. In a wet area behind the fireboxes there were preserved a number of poles from five to ten centimetres in diameter resting directly below the roof tiles. They do not seem to have been large enough for major structural members but rather are most likely the remains of the roofing material between the rafters and tiles which covered them.

Such a technique is not unknown in the Basque country and its use in Labrador would have relieved the whalers of the necessity either to bring boards from Europe or to have sawn them in Labrador. This information will be incorporated into a 1:4 scale reconstruction of a tryworks planned for the Visitor Centre, now under construction.

The Basin

During September work continued at two locations on the north side of The Basin, the large inner harbour which provides shelter from most winds. These two sites were discovered in 1987 (Tuck n.d.) and testing revealed artifacts suggesting an eighteenth century date. Tobacco pipes, green bottle glass, iron nails, fragments of a tin-glazed bowl, shot, gunflints and other objects associated with stone fireplaces all suggest a European occupation. The sites are located at some distance from the shore of The Basin and access is not particularly convenient. It is hard to imagine fishermen, for example, settling at such a distance and having to carry any amount of equipment from the shore to their dwellings, there are no structures of equivalent date on or near the shore immediately in front of the small dwellings. Moreover, the inordinate numbers of blackflies at these two locations during the entire summer makes it very unlikely that any human beings could have survived in such an environment. The function of these structures, therefore, remains equivocal. Small beads of white and blue glass, usually associated with the fur trade, suggest that the structures may be those constructed by Pierre Constantin, a Quebec

entrepreneur, about 1715. They were burned by Inuit a few years later and the post reconstructed in the following year.

At least slight evidence of burning at one of the two loci suggests destruction by fire, but the evidence is far from overwhelming. Moreover, neither of the two structures appears to have been large enough to have housed even three or four Europeans and their provisions and goods for exchange with native trappers. Further exploration of these structures planned for 1989, as well as more intensive surveys of the surrounding area, may reveal additional information regarding their function and origin.

Tourism at Red Bay in 1988

Although the numbers of visitors to Red Bay remained only approximately equal to the 1987 numbers, this fact is explained by road upgrading and construction which resulted in virtually impassable conditions during much of the summer. These conditions were particularly detrimental to organized tours since large busses were unable to travel the road. The improved road, and particularly the eventual paving of the Pinware to Red Bay section of the road promises to increase tourism considerably in the coming years.

Even the approximately 2,000 visitors to the sites have taxed present facilities considerably. For this reason, a self-guided walking tour of Saddle island, clearly marked and with appropriate interpretive signage (in both English and French) was established this past summer. It met with immediate success, not only in relieving staff of the burden of conducting tours three times each day but also in the fact the visitors were free to spend as much

time as they wished on Saddle Island. Many reported that they preferred this type of tour to one in which they were conducted around the area at a fixed (and usually rapid) pace.

The Community of Red Bay has obtained funds for the construction of a Visitor Centre, in a new building immediately adjacent to the Memorial University field laboratory. Construction on the 3,500 square foot building, which will house exhibits, a small theatre, gift shop and washrooms, began this summer and is expected to be completed during 1989. This interim facility will allow Red Bay to continue to take advantage of the increasing tourist momentum until larger facilities are constructed.

References cited

Tuck, J.A.

1985 1984 excavations at Red Bay, Labrador. In Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador 1984, edited by J.S. Thomson and C. Thomson, pp. 224-247. Historic Resources Division, Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth. St. John's.

n.d. 1987 fieldwork at Red Bay, Labrador. Report submitted to the Historic Resources Division, Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth. St. John's.