

EXCAVATIONS AT RED BAY, LABRADOR 1989

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Archaeological explorations at Red Bay continued between early June and late September during 1989. Funding was provided by the Department of Provincial and Municipal Affairs and conservation assistance by the Canadian Conservation Institute.

Our original intention to continue excavations at the Red Bay East site, on the mainland adjacent to the harbour were once again thwarted by sanitary problems caused by raw sewage flowing into the site. Alternative plans, formulated with this possibility in mind, were therefore carried out.

Excavations concentrated in several areas on Saddle Island which, for one reason or another, were not explored in previous seasons, as well as at the Saddle Island West site where the large Native settlement was completely explored, and a new and intensive programme of research on the eighteenth century was begun.

Saddle Island

On Saddle Island several small refuse areas were fully explored, resulting in the recovery of a variety of ceramics, glass, tools and construction materials. Two waterlogged areas were explored, one completely and one partially because of heavy rainfall during the latter part of the summer.

The former area, located near the shore between two large bedrock outcrops and the tryworks built upon them, appears to have been used as a living site. No post moulds or other firm evidence of structures was recovered, but this is not unexpected in an area as rocky as this location and among a people who frequently placed posts on rocks rather than sinking them in the ground. On the other hand, numerous large plates of baleen, well preserved by the wet environment, suggest coverings for temporary structures such as those found at a number of locations elsewhere on Saddle Island. Artifacts were far from numerous, a situation also paralleled by most small living sites associated with the sixteenth century whaling period.

An exception was several large masses of woollen textile, of such a fine weave and in such a remarkable state of preservation that they were at first thought to date from some time more recent than the sixteenth century. The archaeological context, however, - they were covered by sheets of baleen clearly dating from the sixteenth century -- suggested otherwise. So did the textile itself for when unfolding and cleaning took place a typical sixteenth century shirt, with the back of the upright collar cut as an integral part of the back of the garment itself, became clearly visible. Other portions of the garment also soon became apparent, including sleeves and front panels. The unusually fine weave and the 'gathered at the waist' cut of the garment are unique among the sixteenth century garments from Red Bay. The entire collection

apparently represents the only collection of sixteenth century ordinary clothing preserved anywhere in the western world.

The same factors that were responsible for the disappearance of most working class garments -- particularly their being continually 'recycled' and eventually ending their lives as rags -- pose an interesting question about their preservation at Red Bay. All other more or less intact garments have been found associated with human burials. Other textiles are represented only by small scraps of cloth. The 1989 garment clearly does not appear to have reached the point where it would ordinarily have been discarded, yet it was not associated with any human remains.

A few metres away, however, a large mass of insect casings apparently identical to those invariably associated with human burials was revealed. My own opinion, and one that will never be verified, is that the mass of insect casings represents a disturbed grave from which the textiles were displaced, perhaps by scavengers. If this is the case, then other graves should exist, associated with living and work areas around Red Bay.

With this possibility in mind, excavation was begun at a waterlogged area on a terrace immediately above the textile find. Strips of baleen preserved between 30 and 40 cm deep in the peat indicated some activity in the area, but unusually wet weather during the month of August resulted in continual flooding of the area and excavations were forced to be postponed.

Saddle Island West

Work at the Saddle Island West site was essentially completed during 1989. Virtually the entire area has now been exposed, mapped and photographed. A particular aim of the 1989 excavations was to complete excavation of the large trench revealed by 1988 excavations (Tuck n.d.a.). This feature was completely cleared of fill and debris, but little additional evidence of its function was forthcoming. Several large hearths, constructed initially at the bottom of the 60+cm deep feature appear to have grown by slow stages to an elevation of 40 to 50cm above the floor of the trench. The hearths and surrounding hearth rubble contained flakes of high quality cherts, several microblades and at least one biface of apparent Palaeo-Eskimo origin. Unless this feature represents some unique form of dwelling, its function remains undetermined.

Sites in The Basin

Perhaps the most interesting development during the 1989 season was the discovery of what is at least potentially the archaeological evidence for a major eighteenth century 'trading post' at Red Bay. Work at two previously reported (Tuck n.d.a., n.d.b.) sites located on the north side of The Basin was expanded, additional related sites located and previously excavated locations re-evaluated and re-examined with the result that it now appears probable that a large part of an eighteenth century entrepreneurial system is preserved in the Red Bay area.

Excavation at the two small sites discovered in 1987 continued and while ceramics, smoking pipe fragments, glass, shot, gunflints, glass beads and so forth continued to reinforce an early eighteenth century date for the occupations evidence for any substantial structures of the type to be expected from a permanent habitation was not forthcoming. We began to wonder whether our initial identification of these places as the locations of Quebec entrepreneur Pierre Constantin's (see for example Pritchard 1974) establishments was correct. Ralph Pastore, who worked with us for a short time at the beginning of September, pointed out what now seems the most likely explanation for these small structures. He suggested that in view of the relatively firm dating of the assemblages to Constantin's time, and in view of the small size of the structures and the meagre nature of the artifact assemblage, that perhaps these small structures were not the main post at all, but the residences of some of Constantin's employees.

Additional excavation revealed several artifacts and bits of information which appear not only to support this hypothesis, but also to suggest that the inhabitants of these structures were, in fact, Native people. The fact that objects of European origin are relatively few in number is not what would be expected at the principal residences of Europeans, even in areas as remote as Red Bay, during the eighteenth century. Much more productive, and substantial, structures are reported from nearby Brador (Neillon et al. 1984) and from Mingan (Levesque 1971) also on the Lower

North Shore. This fact suggested that more substantial structures must have existed elsewhere at Red Bay.

Some individual artifacts also point to these sites not being the main residence of the European managers of the Red Bay post. Ceramics, for instance, while low in numbers, all show evidence of having been repaired by drilling and lashing, a practice not generally found on European sites. The glass beads are both few in number and of limited variety; they probably derived from a few garments rather than representing part of the stock of trade goods kept at the main habitation. Finally, two fragments of a smoking pipe of Native manufacture and of a decorated (edge-notched) bone fragment both suggest occupation of the structures by Natives.

Operating on this hypothesis, additional surveys were carried out within a roughly two-kilometre radius of the two sites discovered in 1987. These surveys located several additional small sites apparently analogous to those previously tested as well as what appears to be the principal habitation of the post.

The latter is located on the shore of a small cove at the debouchment of Peter's Brook, a stream which would have provided fresh water year round. The remains consist of at least three substantial structures with rock and earth walls now as much as a metre in height. Very limited testing of one of these structure produced a much larger and more varied assemblage of European goods than either of the two other structures.

A much greater variety of trade beads, ceramics, glass and other objects is clearly more like the Mingan and Brador

assemblages than that from either of the two previously explored sites. Although the test trench begun in this structure has not been completed, and the stratigraphy is complicated by what appears to be the remains of a late eighteenth or early nineteenth century structure built inside the walls of the earlier structure, it appears that this site represents the location of the main habitation of Pierre Constantin's Red Bay^y post.

Not only the substantial nature of the remains and the artifacts recovered from within them suggest this possibility, but the location of the complex -- in an area near the shore where goods could have been carried from supply ships to the premises -- also argues that this is indeed the habitation.

If these two groups of structures indeed represent the main post and dwellings of Constantin's employees, or 'servants,' it represents an opportunity to investigate archaeologically a fur trade complex more nearly complete than any other known from the north coast of the St. Lawrence.

In addition to these two components of the system there are also reported (Robitaille 1955) specialized extractive camps, including a fishing station on the Pinware River and a (seal?) fishing station at 'Petit Saint Modet,' probably at the now-abandoned settlement known as 'Samadet.' These locations will be sought in coming field seasons.

Closer to Red Bay, the re-evaluation of an enigmatic site located on Twin Island, and excavated in 1982, proved likely to be a specialized seal fishing camp occupied during Constantin's time.

The small structure utilizes a bedrock outcrop for one wall. The other walls are visible as a double row of rocks extending about 6.5m from the rock face and about 8m in the opposite dimension. At the southeast corner, adjacent to the bedrock, a gap in the rock wall flanked by a pair of post moulds indicates a door. A fireplace composed of clay and rock is backed up against the rock face. Whale bone (ribs and vertebrae) found immediately outside the wall appear to have been used in the structure's construction.

The use of whale bone for construction and the near identity of nails used to fasten the frame of the structure with those from good sixteenth century context elsewhere at Red Bay suggested a sixteenth century origin for this structure. The artifacts from the fireplace, however, provided a confusing element to the picture (see Tuck 1984:79). Three fragments of a tobacco pipe with a small bore diameter clearly dating from a more recent period were found in good context among the rocks and clay of the fireplace.

With new information obtained from sites in The Basin we returned to the Twin Island site in 1989 to continue excavations. An unexcavated portion of the fireplace was removed, excavations were expanded to areas outside the structure and backdirt from the previous excavations was brought to the laboratory for water screening through a fine mesh. The excavations revealed several gunflints and particles of shot identical to those from The Basin sites and water screening recovered several blue and white glass beads also identical to those previously mentioned. It seems clear, therefore, that this small structure, with fireplace and artifacts

identical to those from The Basin sites was occupied during the same time and by the same people.

Twin Island has been well known as a good location for the netting of harp seals and the presence of many calcined seal bone fragments in the Twin Island 1 hearth and hearth rubble indicate that the eighteenth century occupants of the site were there at the same time as the harp seals. The conclusion that this site represents a special-purpose sealing camp is inescapable.

It seems, therefore, that we may have the opportunity to investigate archaeologically many of the parts of an eighteenth century entrepreneurial system on the southern Labrador coast. The main habitation has been identified and tested, at least six small associated dwellings, perhaps those of Native 'servants,' have been located and a special purpose sealing camp has been excavated. Research planned for the coming summers will explore these known sites more fully and search for the other special purpose fishing and sealing stations known to have formed part of the system.

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