

## Le Vieux Fort

Soon after the rediscovery of Newfoundland in 1497, thousands of French, Basque, Spanish and English fishermen visited the island in search of cod. Placentia was an ideal location to prosecute the fishery because it was blessed with a superb, ice-free harbour and a large stone beach suitable for drying fish. Gaspar and Miguel Cortreal, Portuguese explorers, were said to have visited Placentia between 1500 and 1502. A 1547 map indicates the area as the Isle de Plazienca. The Spanish fishermen who fished there in the early 16th century gave the area this name.<sup>1</sup> Towards the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, France was concerned with English encroachment upon the south coast of Newfoundland. She sent colonists and 30 soldiers to establish a royal colony at Plaisance in 1662. The first defense work, called Le Vieux Fort, was erected on a point of land to the east of the settlement. There is a possibility that migrant fishermen had built a small fort previous to this on the same location, but the documentation is sparse.<sup>2</sup> From 1662 – 1667 work proceeded on Le Vieux Fort and at its peak the fortification bristled with 32 cannons. The only known plan of this site dates from the 1670's.<sup>3</sup>

Current documentation would lead the researcher to assume that le Vieux Fort was an insignificant construction. Recent archaeological investigations strongly suggest otherwise. While the fortification does not conform to the outline of the only existing map, it does represent a significant first step in France's desire to protect her economic and strategic interests in Newfoundland.. There were large numbers of domestic artifacts found on site. These include - copper buttons, a copper buckle, a silver ring, a larding needle, iron fragments, many gunflints, and various types of ceramic wares and tobacco pipes.<sup>4</sup> Excavation of one of the structures (called Structure A) inside the fort showed it to be at least 6.6 meters in width and at least 20+ meters in length. It was divided into two rooms and it had stone walls and a wooden roof. The artifacts found therein confirm it to be a residential structure or barracks.<sup>5</sup> To date only a small fraction of the total site has been excavated.

By 1685 the fort was said to be in ruins. France had reduced her financial support to the colony, which would have made repairs to the fort practically impossible.<sup>6</sup> Why had the government reduced its support? It is possible that from 1662 to the early 1680's the English were not considered a military concern since France was not at war with England. Perhaps the presence of the fort, such

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<sup>1</sup> J.M. McCarthy, *A History of Placentia*, unpublished Masters Thesis, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Amanda Crompton, *The Placentia Archaeology Project, 2001: Interim Report*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Jean – Pierre Proulx, *The Military History of Placentia: a Study of the French Fortifications*, National Parks and Sites Branch, Parks Canada, 1979, p.18.

<sup>4</sup> Amanda Crompton, *The Placentia Archaeology Project, 2001: Interim Report*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Crompton, *The Placentia Archaeology Project, 2003: Interim Report*, p. 40

<sup>6</sup> Jean – Pierre Proulx, *The Military History of Placentia: a Study of the French Fortifications*, National Parks and Sites Branch, Parks Canada, 1979, pp. 22-23.

as it was, was considered adequate to protect the national interest. Another possible reason for declining support was that France was actively involved in a series of wars with her continental neighbours: beginning in 1667 with the War of Devolution. She also fought against the Dutch from 1672–1678. From 1688–1697 France fought in the war of the League of Augsburg.<sup>7</sup> It was during this last war that France came into conflict with England and it was also during this time (from 1691 on) that the French began to rebuild their military at Plaisance, starting with the construction of Fort Louis in 1691.

Le Vieux Fort was an important first step in France's intention to defend her interests in the North Atlantic cod fishery. Plaisance was settled to prevent English expansion into southern Newfoundland. Fish was vital as a source of protein and as a source of wealth for the merchants. The fishery was also used as a training school for sailors, who could be pressed into the naval service during wartime. Codfish was seen as vital to the national interest and Le Vieux Fort was built to protect that interest. The subsequent ruination of the fortification was not a reflection changing policy regarding Plaisance, but a reflection of the military reality of the day. During wartime resources are diverted to meet the pressing need. Hence the neglect of Le Vieux Fort. In reality, the construction of this redoubt would be an important page in the history of Newfoundland and Canada as a whole.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Holmes ed., *The Oxford Companion to Military History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, p. 496.