

FRANCE AND NEWFOUNDLAND

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France has been an important participant in the exploration and exploitation of Newfoundland from the very beginning of the sixteenth century. The first fishing voyage to the "new found land" for which there is documentary evidence was a Breton voyage in 1504. By the time Jacques Cartier arrived in Newfoundland in 1534 on his first voyage of exploration to North America, place-names like "Baye de Brest" and "Blanc Sablon in the Labrador Straits region gave proof that Breton, Norman and Basque fishermen had been fishing there in large numbers for a generation.

French fishermen could be found in many parts of Newfoundland. One region stretched from Cape Race to Placentia Bay and beyond. Eventually, in 1662, the French Crown established a colony at Plaisance (Placentia as it is known today), and for several decades, this was the economic, military and administrative centre of the French presence in Newfoundland. Nevertheless, settlement spread not only around Placentia Bay, the Burin Peninsula and the tiny islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon but even further west into Fortune and Hermitage Bays. Another region that attracted French fishermen in growing numbers throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries extended north from Bonavista and particularly on the coast of the Northern Peninsula, which became known as the "Petit Nord," as well as the Labrador coast on the other side of the Straits of Belle Isle. The western coast of Newfoundland became a third region, one that French Basques from Saint-Jean-de-Luz, Ciboure, Bayonne and Cap Breton made their own special domain, although fishermen from St. Malo and Granville were attracted to this region as well.

With the exception of the colony at Plaisance and the small settlements further west, the French presence in these regions was a seasonal one. Every spring, fishermen from the seaports of Brittany, Normandy, the Channel ports and the Basque region of southwestern France arrived by the thousands to catch and to cure cod through the summer, before returning home in the fall, like a vast human tide that ebbed and flowed in an annual cycle. At first, fishermen caught their fish close to shore, using hand lines and small open boats. The fish they caught were given either a "wet" cure ("morue verte") which was preferred in the markets of northern France, or a "dry" cure ("morue seche") which was preferred in more southern markets. By the mid-1500s, French fishermen had begun to fish some distance off-shore as well, over the vast undersea plateaus known as the "banks". There, they caught cod with hand lines lowered directly from the "banking vessels". In this fishery, the cod was heavily salted to prevent spoilage. It was then either brought to shore and given the dry cure or it could be transported directly to France for sale as "morue verte". This remained the pattern well into the nineteenth century, French fishermen using both methods to cure cod in order to satisfy both the domestic French market and foreign ones such as Spain. It was this ability to serve a variety of markets and consumer tastes that contributed to the longevity of the French fishery in Newfoundland.

The French shared the fishery with the English, who preferred the so-called "English Shore," a stretch of coast from Trepassey to Bonavista. However, the French fishery was larger than the English one, whether measured in fishermen, fishing vessels, productivity, or geographical scale. At its peak in the late 1670s and 1680s, the French fishery employed as many as 20,000 men (about one quarter of the French maritime population) and 300 vessels, outnumbering the English by roughly two to one. In a very real sense, therefore, seventeenth-century Newfoundland was more French than English. Generally, there was little hostility between French and English fishermen in the 1600s, because there was more than enough room for everyone, both in the fishery and in the markets of Europe. However, friction began to grow during that century between the French and English states, and this hostility spilled into Newfoundland. During the wars of 1689-1697 and 1702-1713, open warfare raged in Newfoundland. The French captured St. John's and other English settlements more than once, but the winter campaign of Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville in 1696-1697 was possibly the most destructive of all French attacks on English Newfoundland. Nevertheless, when the first cycle of wars ended in 1713, French conceded sovereignty over Newfoundland (including St. Pierre and Miquelon) to Great Britain. In part this was because the French Crown was willing to sacrifice its interests in Newfoundland for priorities elsewhere in the world. Yet by 1713 it was also clear that the royal colony at Plaisance could not be judged a success. Limited resources, social dissension, and a harsh climate had undermined the ability of the colony to prosper. Population growth was disappointing; in 1711, after nearly fifty years of effort, there were fewer than 250 permanent male inhabitants.

Prior to 1713, English and French legislation allowed for French boats and equipment to be left behind and later claimed as personal property, and even though this practice was forbidden after 1713 it continued covertly. French boats, flakes and other structures were now left under the protection of British subjects who received sufficient payment in kind to allow them to eke out an existence by sealing and trapping. In 1828, for example, Eugène Ney reported from Croc, "Un Anglais, qui passe tous les hivers au Croc à garder nos cabanes, envoie au printemps de nombreuses fourrures à Saint-Jean" (Ney, 350). By the mid-nineteenth century, the French were building large boats in local harbours and housing them during the winter. Though they forcibly evicted some settlers from their designated harbours, an informal but illegal understanding had developed. Thus, when the commander of the French naval patrol was asked to report on the relationship in 1846, he observed that French fishing captains were counting on the services of trustworthy settlers but did not want to see their numbers increase.

According to the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht, by which France gave up its claims of sovereignty to the island of Newfoundland, French fishermen were restricted to the coast between Cape Bonavista to the east and Point Riche to the west. All French settlements in Newfoundland were abandoned. This signalled more than just the failure of the French colonization in Newfoundland. It was also an indication that the French presence in the fisheries was beginning to decline. There were other signs of this: fewer vessels were fitted out for the fisheries; the number of French ports involved in the fishery declined. By the fifty French ports active in the middle of the sixteenth century had diminished to about thirty in 1660, and only about a dozen by 1713. By the 1780s, about sixty percent

of all French vessels fishing on the banks, and about eighty percent of all French vessels fishing on the coast of Newfoundland would come from just two ports B St. Malo and Granville.

Still, the French had not abandoned Newfoundland completely. The English authorities at St. John's had their hands full trying to extend their control over Placentia and the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon. They had neither the time nor the desire to patrol the more remote coasts to the west. And so it was that French fishermen continued to fish in Newfoundland, not only on the "French Shore" in accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Utrecht but also on the west coast of Newfoundland south of Pointe Riche, all the way to Cape Ray and Port-aux-Basques. Not until the next cycle of wars began in 1744-1748 and again in 1755-1763 did the French finally abandon western Newfoundland. The famous cartographic surveys of James Cook, which began in 1763 and continued through until 1767, were commissioned largely because the British government wished to strengthen both its knowledge of and its claims to those more distant parts of Newfoundland.

To understand these concerns, we must realize that the fishery at Newfoundland was important not just for its economic advantages as a source of employment and trade, but also as a strategic asset. France (like England) regarded the fishery as a key element of national sea power, a "nursery for seamen" where Frenchmen were transformed into seasoned mariners who would be available for service in the navy in time of war. So important was preservation of the fishery at Newfoundland to the French government that in 1762, despite a string of devastating defeats (including the loss of important overseas colonies like Canada and Martinique), it was prepared to continue fighting rather than accept any peace terms which would have excluded France from the Newfoundland fishery. In the end, France managed to preserve its Treaty Shore privileges and even to restore control over St. Pierre and Miquelon.

The French Shore did undergo one important revision in 1783, at the conclusion of the War of the American Revolution. By then, the spread of English settlement into Notre Dame Bay had become a source of friction with French fishermen. England and France therefore agreed to shift the boundaries of the French shore westward; from 1783 until 1904, the French Shore extended west from Cape St. John, around the Northern Peninsula and all the way down to Cape Ray. French outfitters after 1783 responded quickly to the restoration of peace and to government incentives to revive their fishery, though their production tended to be aimed at the domestic market in France and the French West Indies; the markets in Spain and Portugal were now dominated by English fish.

Yet despite the shift of the Treaty Shore into western Newfoundland, the French fishery was now about to experience its greatest crisis ever. In 1793, long before the French fishery had been able to take full advantage of the new limits of the Treaty Shore, England and France went back to war. This time, the war lasted so long that French fishery at Newfoundland was devastated. Unlike the English, who could count on the residential fishery to pick up part of the lost production whenever war threatened their migratory fishery, the eighteenth-century French fishery had become almost exclusively

migratory in character, that is, based entirely in France. So great was British command of the sea in these wars that the French were forced to suspend fishing operations completely. The only French residential fishery by that time was St. Pierre and Miquelon, and these islands were quickly captured in 1793 when war broke out. The restoration of peace in 1802 lasted barely a year, not even enough time to return anyone to St. Pierre. By the time the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars came to an end in 1815, the French fishery at Newfoundland had been suspended for a full generation. This was a long interruption for an industry and trade that depended so very much on skills and knowledge passed on from one fishermen to the next. Nevertheless, in the years after 1815, the French fishery gradually reappeared on the Treaty Shore, at St. Pierre and Miquelon, and on the Grand Banks. By the late 1820s, more than 9,000 French nationals were back every summer on the Treaty Shore, testimony to the powerful lure of the rich cod stocks of Newfoundland and to French determination to remain a significant part of an industry that by then was more than three hundred years old.

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