

Archaeology at Anse à Bertrand, Saint-Pierre et Miquelon 2018

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Figure 1: Anse à Bertrand, Saint-Pierre, Saint-Pierre et Miquelon.

The archipelago of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon (SPM) is located just off the southern coast of Newfoundland's Burin Peninsula. This unique destination has garnered international attention in recent years (Davidson 2018; Lahiton 2018) as the last remaining French colony in North-America since 1815. This unique history prompted a three-year archaeological research project to better understand SPM's role in the cod fishery and the trans-Atlantic trade networks operating between the 17th and 19th centuries. The 2018 field season marks the second excavation in Anse à Bertrand, Saint-Pierre.

This small, overseas French collectivity is comprised of three islands; Saint-Pierre, Miquelon, and Langlade. Saint-Pierre, where Anse à Bertrand is located, is the smallest of the three islands; it has however, also been the most densely populated island since the beginning of the colonization era due to its well-sheltered harbour. By the 16th century, Europeans had begun exploiting the lucrative cod stocks in and around Newfoundland, and became aware of the archipelago and its key location next to the produc-

tive Grand Bank fishing grounds. When Jacques Cartier claimed the island in the name of France in 1536, it was already being frequented seasonally by Portuguese, Breton, and Basque fisherman. French fisherman would continue to use this island until the beginning of the 18th century when the British first pillaged it, starting a long series of aggressions centered around fishing rights and the exploitation of cod. In 1815 Saint-Pierre and Miquelon was retroceded to France one final time after nine changes in governance, marking Saint-Pierre and Miquelon as the last remaining French stronghold in the North-Atlantic. France's maintained governance also served to guarantee their fishing rights in and around Newfoundland.

Little is known about the lifeways of Saint-Pierre's inhabitants prior to 1815, due to the back and forth nature of SPM's early settlement. As a result, there is a lack of archives from this period; local historians have not yet researched the long English period between 1713 and 1763, and their interim settlement until 1815. Therefore, archaeology is a key method in providing access to the past of the archi-

pelago in light of a distinct lack of documentary evidence. Despite the potential presented by archaeology, very few archaeological projects have been implemented in the territory. Our project is only the fourth archaeological inquiry in SPM, but the first ever historical archaeological excavation on Saint-Pierre. Two previous projects were based on Saint-Pierre by Jean Chapelot (Chapelot et al. 1987) and Sylvie Leblanc (Leblanc 2008), and one on Miquelon, by Anne Laure Martinot (Martinot 2009). It should be noted that while there has been little research done prior to 1815, many local historians, mostly descendants from the 19th century immigration waves, have researched and documented the history and settlement of the island since then.

The site of Anse à Bertrand, located on the southeast side of the harbour mouth has been continually occupied since at least 1680, when four stages, a fort, a chapel, and two habitations with accompanying graves (stone features used to dry cod) were documented on site (Plan du port et de la colonie de l'isle de St Pierre 1680-1700). This area would continue to be occupied in varying degrees until the 1970s when the French government expropriated the inhabitants in favour of extending the airstrip that backs the area. To date, only three buildings remain on the site, two 19th -20th c. houses and a saline (salt house).

The first field season of the project occurred in 2017 with nine field school students from Memorial University excavating two 5mx2m trenches over a four-week period (Losier et al. 2018; Livingston et al. 2018). In total, over 7200 artifacts were uncovered



Figure 2: Field director, Catherine Losier, unearthing the 2017 excavation.

with about 5000 of them originating from sondage 1, located on the western side of the site. The greater concentration of artifacts from sondage 1, along with visible features and an undisturbed 18th century layer prompted the expansion of the area to be undertaken in 2018.

Contributing to the main objectives of filling the gaps in the historiography and better understanding the colonial era settlements of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, the research goals for the 2018 season were: to locate and document the extent of the erosion that effected the area before the bank was rebuilt in 2005, to locate and document the extent of the flat stone feature uncovered in 2017 in the SW corner of sondage 1, and to locate and document the extent of the 18th century layers and

features. To achieve this, Dr. Catherine Losier, Meghann Livingston, Maryssa Barras, and Mallory Champagne, along with 13 archaeology field school students from Memorial University undertook a 5-week formal excavation of four sectors (3, 4, 5, and 6) directly bordering the sondage 1 excavated in 2017. Sectors 3, 4 and 5 are each 5mx2m trenches expanding the western, southern, and eastern borders of the 2017 excavation, and sector 6 is a 1mx5m unit expanding northward towards the shoreline.

The 17th and 18th century context (fig. 1) found in the northeastern corner of the excavation likely represents the migratory fishing tradition of seasonal European fisherman. We know from archival records and the historiography of the archipelago that around this time fishing traditions saw a shift from seasonal exploitation to settlement, meaning there would be substantial structures built to last. This be-

ing said, Anse à Bertrand was likely still used seasonally for a time as it was and still is a very exposed, windswept stretch of coastline. The 17th-18th century context is currently unclear. It is centred on a large rock that extends in to the natural soil, and is marked by a very deep, black silty layer, with a high artifact concentration. It is also marked by a linear arrangement of rocks extending around the large rock. The current working hypothesis for this feature and surrounding area is that it marks the end of a stage, which would have been built on top of the large rocks, and lines up almost exactly with the remains of

This period is associated with the “petits pêcheurs” tradition, which marked a more familial settlement in Anse à Bertrand. Archaeologically, this context is characterized by three main features. The flat stone feature associated with the 19th-20th centuries, has been suggested by a community member to be the base of a cabestan (capstan), which could in turn be associated with the large iron anchoring chain a close distance away. South of the flat stone feature, there appears to be a small wall. The wall running perpendicularly along-side these features is also associated with the 19th-20th century. Finally, in the southeastern



Figure 3: 2018 field crew. Top Left: Adam Van De Spiegle, Savannah Hatch, Jon LeDrew, Greg Howley, Liam McCarthy, Julieanne George. Bottom Left: Liam Andrews, Sarah Roberts, Jordan Hollahan, Abby Oyler, Chermaine Liew, Meghann Livingston, Mallory Champagne, Katie Oldford, Hannah Dwyer, Maryssa Barras.

what appears to be a stage foundation that extends out in to the water.

Artifacts associated with this context include a large concentration of Normandy stoneware, Saintonge coarse earthenware, onion bottle fragments, Westerwald stoneware, and numerous pipe fragments (some with Reuben Sidney stamped perpendicularly on the stem). Sidney, is a known clay pipe maker from Southampton, England operating from 1687-1748 (Gaulton 1999). These artifacts are generally utilitarian objects associated with the French migratory fishery, examples of this can be seen in work on migratory fisheries of the Petit Nord (Pope 2008).

The 19th and 20th century contexts (fig. 2) can be found along the southern wall of the excavation.

corner, we excavated the stone floor of a 20th century saline.

Artifacts associated with the 19th and 20th century context are more closely associated with the household, with more colorful ceramics being found and greater variability between types. These contexts also demonstrated a high amount of pipe fragments in addition to broken glass and stemware with a significant portion of the collection showing evidence of heat alteration that has been associated with this section of the excavation.

Due to the expropriation of the population of Anse à Bertrand in the 1970s there is very little associated with the 21st century context (fig. 3). Today, Anse à Bertrand is used as a popular drive-by spot, and is populated by local horses that graze along the



Figure 4: In red, the 18th c. context, hypothesized to be the terrestrial base of a stage.

Figure 5: Students excavating under the watchful eye of Meghann Livingston and Maryssa Barras.





Figure 6: 19th – 20th c. context found within the 2018 excavation of sectors 3,4,5, and 6. (a) Flat stone feature found initially in the SW corner of Sondage 1 from 2017, (b) directly south appears to be a small wall (c) wall, (d) base of 20th century saline.

open spaces. Along the northern wall of the excavation unit we have found the limit of the fill associated with the rebuilding of the eroding embankment in 2005. The fill appears to cut a small portion of the

site, leading us to deduce that some of the archaeological context has been lost to erosion over the centuries since it was first settled. In the southeastern corner, over top of the 20th century saline floor, we

Figure 7: Student Savannah with a French tin-glazed ceramic sherd, found in sector 4.



found two large concrete squares, believed to be the base of a now gone park bench.

To revisit the research goals for this season, we think we can confidently say they were all met. In orange, the limit of the site, and extent of the erosion is denoted by the fill found along the northern wall of the excavation. This would indicate that the northern extent of the site was affected by erosion and some contexts may be lost. In green, the limit of the feature in the SW corner of sector 1 was also completely mapped and identified



Figure 8: 21st c. context (a) limit of erosion and fill from the reinforcement of the shoreline in 2005 (b) base of park bench.

Figure 9: In orange, the limit of the site and extent of the erosion before bank rebuilding in 2005. In green, the limit of the structure discovered in the SW corner of the 2017 excavation. In red, the limit of the 18th c. structure uncovered in 2017 and 2018 field seasons.





Figure 9: Student Julieanne looking for the datum with some local equine help.

throughout the season. While it has been suggested that it may be the base of a cabestan, the substantiality of the flat stone feature may not support this theory. The final goal, in red, was also successfully completed, with a preliminary hypothesis that the 18th century context marks the terrestrial base of a stage. These hypotheses can be further developed with the complete analysis of the material culture associated with these features, which is currently underway.

The 2018 season also presented us with an opportunity to further build our relationship with the community of SPM. The welcoming and curious attitude of local people, as with last year, was instrumental in helping us understand the landscape and features of their past. We were often visited with stories and pictures of the site, some dating to as early as 1890, that were not located in any archives or museums. Continuing the tradition of last year, we were also able to excavate with youths in the community on a weekly basis, with Meghann, Mallory, and Maryssa also being invited to the high school to do a 3-day workshop with students on how their local archaeology is conducted. To date, the team looks forward to the upcoming 2019 field season, and hopes to return to Saint-Pierre to expand upon and under-

stand the strategies that fisher folk undertook to settle on this small archipelago.

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