The Settlement of Havre Saint Pierre

Unidentified French fishing station c1700.

This harbour is the most populated place on the Island; it is only settled by the earlier inhabitants. Some fish for cod, others cultivate the land and several do both.

This short description of the St. Peters Bay area, written in 1751 by military engineer Louis Franquet, gives a brief but accurate picture of the French community which had been developing on the shores of the bay for some 30 years. In fact, Havre Saint Pierre, with Port La Joie, was the first important European settlement on the Island. While Port La Joie, strategically located at the entrance of what we now call Charlottetown Harbour, was chosen as the military and administrative capital of the new colony, Havre-Saint-Pierre immediately became the "commercial capital" and the most populous settlement on the Island.

In fact, about two-thirds of the French immigrants who arrived on the Island in the summer of 1720 went directly to the north shore where the majority of them settled on the west shore of St. Peters Bay. Those immigrants came to the Island under the sponsorship of the Compagnie de l'Isle Saint Jean. This company had received the previous year from King Louis XV a land grant "to establish inhabitants and a sedentary cod fishery" which included this Island, Miscou Island and the Magdalen Islands. The letters patent stipulated that in order to retain its concession, the Company had to settle one hundred colonists the first year and fifty in each of the following ones.

The principal shareholder of the Company was Louis-Hyacinthe de Castel, Comte de Saint-Pierre, a member of the Normandy gentry. There is no indication that he ever came to the Island, but his name was given to the bay where his company established its fishing station. He entrusted the direction of the settlement to a young man who was about 25 years old, Robert-David Gatteville de Belile. Although he was very young, he already had much experience in the King's navy.

The efforts of the Compagnie de l'Isle Saint-Jean were not very successful. The Comte de Saint-Pierre had hoped to recoup his investments quickly with profits from the fishery, but he encountered innumerable obstacles, and by the end of 1724, the company was forced to cease its operation on the Island, and by the following year it had lost its fishing rights in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. However, the departure of the company did not result in the end of the community of Havre Saint Pierre. A number of the settlers and fishermen who had been brought there by the company stayed on and continued their business dealings with fishing merchants operating out of Louisbourg and France.

By Georges Arsenault
The settling of the area

In the period documents, two names are used to identify this area of the Island. The first is Havre Saint Pierre, which translates as St. Peter’s Harbour, havre (harbour) being the term generally used at the time to designate a bay. The second name is Saint-Pierre-du-Nord (St. Peter of the North). That was the name given to the Catholic parish which also included the communities of Havre aux Sauvages (Savage Harbour) and Tracadie.

The exact number of settlers and fishermen brought to Havre Saint Pierre by the Compagnie de l’Isle Saint Jean in 1720 is unknown. The first census of the Island dates back to 1728. In that year, there were 23 homes in the community with a total permanent population of 116 people: 34 men and 29 women were enumerated as well as 25 boys, 33 girls and 5 servants. About half of the heads of households (18) had arrived before 1725 while the 15 others had very recently settled on the Island. Of those 15 newcomers, 10 were single men: seven fishermen, two merchants and a carpenter. The community was made up principally of individuals born in France—mostly from the northwestern provinces of Normandy and Brittany—but several from other parts of the country such as Gascogne in the south, and Paris. A few of the young women were Acadian; that is they had been born in Acadie (roughly today’s mainland Nova Scotia) and had married young men who had come to the Island from France.

The inhabitant of Havre Saint Pierre who had been living the longest on the Island, according to the 1728 census, was François Douville. Born in Saint-Denis-le-Gatz, in Normandy, he arrived in 1719, one year before the Comte de Saint-Pierre’s contingent. On his death certificate, dated the 30th of January 1757, Father Jean de Biscaret, the priest who officiated at the funeral service, claimed that the deceased had been the “first inhabitant of the said Island.”

Around 1722, when he was about 38 years old, François Douville
married a 13-year-old girl by the name of Marie Roger, the daughter of Gabriel Roger, another pioneer of Havre Saint Pierre. Marie had been born in La Rochelle, France, although her father was a native of the island of Orléans, near Québec City. He had arrived on the Island in 1720. François and Marie had a family of eleven children.

When François Douville died, he was the most prosperous resident of the area. In the census taken in 1752, he is identified as a fisherman, a navigator and a farmer. He owned three properties; he had the largest herds and he was the owner of a boat and two fishing shallops. Douville was also the proprietor of a flour mill located at the "fond des Étangs" (head of St. Peters Lake), where Bristol is located today.

Another pioneer of the St. Peters Bay area, Charles Charpentier, has a certain connection with the village of Morell. A native of Normandy, he arrived on the Island in 1720 and was listed as a fishermen in Havre Saint Pierre in the 1728 census. By the following census, six years later, he seems to be well-established with one servant and ten fishermen in his employ. Around 1723 Charpentier married Marie-Joseph Chené, dit "La Garenne." Less than a year after her husband's death in 1738, she remarried in the Saint Pierre du Nord church Jean-François Morel, a native of Saint-Malo, in Brittany, France. Morel probably moved in with his wife on the Charpentier property. According to the 1752 census, that acreage was located on the river, this being possibly the "rivière à Charles" as noted by Alan Rayburn in Geographical Names of Prince Edward Island. "Rivière à Charles" was apparently named for Charles Charpentier, Marie-Joseph Chené's first husband. Later the river became known by the family name of her second husband, Morel, hence the name of the community of Morell.

Havre Saint Pierre in the 1750s

While all of the settlements founded on the Island after 1724 consisted mainly of Acadian families who came from the mainland, Havre Saint Pierre distinguished itself throughout its existence by having the largest French-born population.
However, as the years went by, it became more and more Acadian, especially because of the womenfolk. In fact, many of the single fishermen who came over from France to work married into Acadian families on the Island or on the mainland and brought their wives to Havre Saint Pierre.

By 1752, about half of the population of the Havre Saint Pierre area, a total of 273 individuals, consisting of 52 households, was at least partly Acadian. This population was concentrated on the west shore of the bay, at St. Peters Harbour, with some families settled around St. Peters Lake (Etang Saint Pierre). A group of families lived on the east side of the bay (Greenwich) and a few others settled as far away as Five Houses. Of the 91 adults enumerated in the 1752 census, 38 were natives of France, 38 had been born in Acadie (31 them were women), 5 were natives of Île Royale (Cape Breton), and one hailed from Québec.

Of the 52 heads of household whom the census-taker, Joseph de la Roque, met, eight had been living on the Island for at least 28 years. They had arrived in Havre Saint Pierre before 1725, during the years when the Compagnie de l’Île Saint-Jean was in charge of the settlement. Eight other adults, who were between the ages of 20 and 31, had been born in Havre Saint Pierre and were members of the community’s founding families. Most of the family names are today uncommon to most of us: Delaborde, Berloin, Jacquet, Duclaud, Le Prieur dit “Dubois,” Talbot, Quimine, Oudy, and Bonniere.

In the census, a majority of the male heads of household are described as “pécheur-laboureur,” that is that they combined fishing and farming as an occupation. However, eleven men are simply listed as fishermen and eight as farmers. Among other occupations, the census lists three merchants or traders, a tailor, a locksmith, and a surgeon. In the 18th century, a surgeon was not a trained professional but rather a tradesman. Unlike the physician who studied in a school of medicine, the surgeon learned his trade from a master surgeon. There were also three male household servants and three other young employees brought over from France. They were under contract with their employer for a three year period.

**Fishing industry**

Cod fishing was the base of the economy of Havre Saint Pierre throughout its 38 years as a French settlement. From 1749, it was the only harbour, with that of Tracadie, where commercial fishing was allowed. The French authorities were so anxious that the island become the granary of Louisbourg that they decided to restrict fishing to ensure that the inhabitants devote all their energy to agricultural production.

Many of the fishermen on the Island were employed by local merchants, while others were independent and sold their catches to merchants from Louisbourg or France. In the summer, a great number of young fishermen arrived from France to fish out of this area, almost doubling the local population. In 1734, for instance, 163 seasonal fishermen worked out of Havre Saint Pierre while the permanent population was only 176. In the 1730s and early 40s, many of those fishermen were employed by the Trois-Rivières entrepreneur, Jean-Pierre Roma; his employees at Havre Saint Pierre numbered 50 in 1734. That year, the enumerator found 35 fishing shallops in Havre Saint Pierre (10 belonging to Roma), also one “bateau” or schooner, and two boats for commerce and coastal trading. Relations were often tense among the permanent and seasonal residents. Frequently, an officer from the administrative quarters at Port La Joie had to come to the north shore to settle differences between the merchants, the inhabitants and the fishermen. Commandant Jacques d’Esptet de Pensens wrote that the fishermen on the north shore were “a people who avoided only too easily obedience and discipline.”

Fishing was a challenging occupation at Havre Saint Pierre. In 1732, in a letter to the Minister of Colonies in Paris, De Pensens noted: “Although fishing is good and much less costly than on Île Royale, nevertheless until now the fishermen have had considerable difficulty in coping for lack of fishing gear. For the past two years a boat has been coming to this port: prompted by
necessity, the inhabitants often paid half as much again for their provisions as in Louisbourg, which meant that they were incapable of paying their debts and even of having the foodstuffs to feed their families during the winter.

The situation had not changed 20 years later when Joseph de la Roque visited the area: "It must be remembered that so long as the fishermen are obliged to procure all their fishing equipment, supplies, and food from the merchants of Louisbourg, or other itinerant traders, they will, owing to the excessive prices they have to pay for what merchandise they require, and the moderate prices they receive for their fish, always find themselves conducting their fishery operations at a loss."

It should however be stressed that those who did not rely solely on fishing, but also farmed, fared much better. As mentioned earlier, most settlers did both. De la Roque noted in his report, "The lands around St. Pierre are suitable for cultivation and the settlers successfully follow the occupations of fishing and of cultivating the soil. The lands that have been seeded this year present one of the most beautiful scenes that anyone could desire to witness."

The previous year, military engineer Louis Franquet, during his tour of inspection of the Island, also noted the quality of the crops: "Unless of a misfortune, all of the inhabitants who cultivate the soil will harvest this year more grain than they need for their consumption, several have even acknowledged that they will be able to sell some of it." Franquet also writes about the dunes and the marram grass that grows on them. He mentions that it makes for good fodder for cattle and that the access to it is frequently the source of animosity and disputes between the settlers, as the dunes are crown property.

Franquet states in his report that the homes of the settlers are somewhat far apart because of the size of the land grants, but that the fishermen's houses, all bordering the bay, are much closer to each other. He reports that all the woods between the source of the "rivière du Nord-Est" (Hillsborough River) and the bay are burned and that the inhabitants suffer from the inconvenience of having to go a long distance in

The Deportation

Some follow-up was given by the French government to Franquet's report. One of them was a resident parish priest for Saint-Pierre-du-Nord. The last one was Father Jean Biscare. He arrived in Havre Saint Pierre in 1755 and remained there until 1758 when he was deported overseas with most of his parishioners after the Island was taken over by the British, subsequent to the fall of Louisbourg.

Little is known how the inhabitants were rounded up and brought to Port La Joie from where they were deported to France. It was indeed a colossal tragedy for this population. According to Earle Lockerby's detailed study of this very gloomy episode in Prince Edward Island's history, approximately 3100 individuals, out of an estimated population of 4700, were deported from the Island. More than half (1649) of the deportees died at sea, either by disease, illness or drowning. Close to 120 of those who had made it to France died in the months following their arrival. In other words, 60% of all the Islanders who were deported in 1758 did not survive the ordeal.

A great number of the victims were from the Havre Saint Pierre area. According to genealogist Stephen White, whole families - at least 24 - became extinct. One tragic example is that of the Oudy clan which lived in Greenwich. The matriarch of this clan, Marguerite Saulnier, widow of Jacques Oudy, ten of her children, her stepson, her stepdaughter, her sons-in-law, her daughters-in-law and all of her numerous grandchildren disappeared in 1758. They and

*See Earle Lockerby's "Deportation of the Acadians from Ile St.-Jean, 1758," in The Island Magazine # 46, Fall-Winter, 1999.
the other deportees from the Havre Saint Pierre area were probably on board the Violet, which sank during a storm on December 12th, bringing to their deaths between 300 and 400 passengers. Of those who survived the disaster, some settled in France, some were recruited for French colonization projects on the Falkland Islands and in French Guiana off the coast of South America. A few tried their luck on the islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, a few ended up in Nova Scotia. A great number finally emigrated to Louisiana from France in 1785.

None seem to have returned here on the Island. However, in the 19th century, a few descendants of former Havre Saint Pierre residents came from Nova Scotia to settle in Kings County. Among them was Élie-David Charpentier, a great-grandson of Charles Charpentier. These Charpentiers moved around a lot after being deported to Saint-Malo. They went as far as the Falkland Islands where Élie-David’s father Alexandre was born. The family went back to France then to Arichat (Cape Breton), then to Bonaventure in the Gaspé, back to Cape Breton and later to Havre Boucher (Antigonish County, N.S). Élie-David Charpentier came to Rollo Bay from Havre Boucher around 1820 where he married a local girl, Véronique Bourque. Over the years, this family name has been anglicized to Carpenter.

The old Montague-Georgetown family of Boudreault can also trace its roots to Havre Saint Pierre, being direct descendants of Basile Boudreault who settled on the bay around 1750. Deported to France, Basile’s son, Jean-Cyprien came back to North America in the early 1790s and settled in Cape Breton. In the 1860s, his grandson Augustin moved to the Montague area.

After the 1763 Treaty of Paris, which ended hostilities between Britain and France, a few Acadian families ended up in the deserted Havre Saint Pierre area, working for a fishing establishment opened around 1763 by New England merchant Gamaliel Smethurst. In 1764, another fishing operation, financed by London merchants Spence, Mills, Muir and Cathcart, was established on the bay. It was apparently managed by David Higgins, whom we know was actively recruiting Acadians scattered around the Gulf of St. Lawrence for the Island fishery in the 1760s.

According to the 1768 census, St. Peters Bay was home to 71 Acadians: 15 men (all employed in the fishery), 13 women, 26 boys and 17 girls. Unfortunately the census does not list names, but in all probability these people were not former residents of Havre Saint Pierre. When the fish industry was paralyzed in the 1770s, a consequence of the American War of Independence, these families left old Havre Saint Pierre and moved on, probably to settle in Malpeque, Rustico or Fortune Bay.

Today, there is nothing left of the once-thriving French settlement at St. Peters Bay, although small artifacts can still easily be found in freshly-ploughed fields. The most important artifact ever to be unearthed was the bell of the Saint-Pierre-du-Nord church. In 1879 it was ploughed up by a farmer in a field in St. Peters Harbour not far from where the church once stood and where the remains of the first French settlers lie in unmarked graves. This bell now hangs in the belfry of the beautiful St. Alexis church of Rollo Bay – where it still calls to worship descendants of the former inhabitants of Havre Saint Pierre.

Sources
This article is based on a lecture given at a 2002 conference organized by the Havre Saint Pierre Historical Committee. It relies heavily on early Island census: 1728, 1734, 1752 and 1768. Joseph de la Roque’s detailed 1752 census is reproduced in Report concerning Canadian Archives for the Year 1905. Louis Franquet’s 1751 report was published in Rapport de l’archiviste de la province de Québec pour 1923-24, 1924. Jacques d’Espiet de Pensens letter dated 5 March 1732 is found in the Archives des Colonies, C3B, vol. 12, folio 79. The original church records of Saint-Pierre-du-Nord are to be found in the Archives départementales d’Ille-et-Vilaine, France. A transcript is available on microfilm at PARO.


Genealogist Stephen A. White generously supplied me with information dealing with the Havre Saint Pierre families. See also his Dictionnaire généalogique des familles acadiennes, volumes 1 & 2 (Moncton, Centre d’études acadiennes, 1999) and his article "Les fondateurs de la paroisse d’Arichat, Cap-Breton", Les Cahiers (Volume 23, No. 1, pp. 4-26). For more information on François Douville, see "Le premier insulaire d’origine européenne enterré à St. Peters Harbour", in La Petite Souvenance, (Number 16, March 2002, p. 9-11).


I would like to thank Earle Lockerby for reading this article and for making helpful suggestions.