

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

3

MORE THAN THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO  
MEMBERS OF THE DENYS FAMILY WERE  
FISHING IN GASPEIAN WATERS AND HAD  
ESTABLISHED SETTLEMENT ON OUR SHORES.

THIS ACCOUNT RECALLS HIGHLIGHTS OF  
DENYS FAMILY ACTIVITIES AND LAMENTS  
THE FAILURE TO RECONSTRUCT ONE OF  
GASPESIA'S HISTORIC SPOTS.

KEN ANNETT

## THE DENYS FAMILY IN GASPEZIA

For the remarkably long period of more than a half-century, from the 1630's until 1690, members of the Denys family played an important role in the early life of Gaspesia and left to us priceless records of that distant time. In our time, Canadian authorities, who have provided vast sums of money to reconstruct and to publicize such historic sites as Port Royal, Louisbourg, Old Quebec and the Upper Canada Village, have apparently consigned to oblivion the truly historic Denys fishing station at Percé and their manor and winter headquarters at Barachois. The historic significance of these Gaspesian sites and the story of the Denys family in Gaspé are worthy of wider recognition. To that end, this issue of GASPE OF YESTERDAY will attempt to recall some aspects of this early and important chapter of Gaspesia's past.

As the personalities and careers of several members of the Denys family were intimately interwoven with early life in Gaspesia a brief introduction is in order:

**JEHAN DENYS** - Mariner of Honfleur, France, who sailed the Gulf of St. Lawrence as early as 1506 and who is said to have made one of the first charts of the Gulf and entrance to Bay Chaleur.

**NICOLAS DENYS** - 1598-1688. From 1633 until his death was personally active in the fishery and trade of the Acadia region, including Gaspesia.

Noted author of an early, complete and authoritative book on the region and the fisheries.

**SIMON DENYS** - Brother of Nicolas and associated with him in America. Enobled by the King of France and served as a member of the Sovereign Council of New France

- RICHARD DENYS - Sieur de Fronsac. Son of Nicolas and Marguerite Lafite Denys. Served in youth with his father in Acadia and was later involved with his own fishing stations at Miramichi, Restigouche and Percé.
- PIERRE DENYS - Sieur de la Ronde. Son of Simon Denys. The active manager of the Denys fishing station at Percé and later the Seigneur of the Isle Percé Seigneurie. His manor house and winter headquarters were at Barachois.
- ST-PIERRE DENYS - Another son of Simon. Served at Percé with his brother, Pierre.
- BONAVENTURE DENYS - Son of Pierre and the last of his line to hold the Percé Seigneurie prior to its pillage and destruction in 1690.
- JOSEPH DENYS - Son of Pierre. As a member of the religious he served the Isle Percé Seigneurie.

To lend perspective to the lives and times of these Denys family members a brief review of European presence in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and Bay Chaleur is warranted. While the beginnings of the fisheries of the waters that wash the long coasts of Gaspesia are lost in the mists of ancient times, there is evidence that fishermen and whalers from the lands of Western Europe frequented these rich fishing grounds from 1500 A.D. onwards. Indeed it is known that the Basques were in the Gulf some decades prior to 1500 and that by the time Jacques Cartier sailed into the Gulf and the Bays of Chaleur and Gaspé in 1534 the fishery was already well-established. For the Basques had been followed to these waters by the Bretons and the Normans, adventurous seamen sailing from such ports as Boulogne, Calais, Dieppe, Honfleur and St-Malo. It has been noted above that Jehan Denys of Honfleur sailed and charted the Gulf in 1506.

In the hundred years that followed the voyage of Jacques Cartier the Gaspé coast was visited annually by fishermen from Western Europe during the season from May to November. Of that period the Rev. George Patterson has given the following description in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Canada, Vol. VIII:

"Of the life of these men on those shores we have no record, but we can form an idea only by what we know of a later period. But we think it did not differ materially from that of the same class in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The cod was the primary object of pursuit, and then, as now, was taken by the line in deep waters. Although Hakluyt speaks of some taking the fish home wet, yet the earliest glimpses we obtain of them show them as having establishments on land, as well for the preparation of it for market, as for the prosecution of the inshore fishery. Here were erected stages and other appliances for the splitting, cleaning, salting and drying the fish and extracting the oil from the liver. The amazing abundance of smaller fish near the shore in their season, such as the herring and the mackerel, afforded opportunities for profit which could not have been allowed to pass unimproved. Perhaps, however, the whale might have been a more tempting object of pursuit, at least to the more daring, from the excitement which its capture occasioned and the large profit to be obtained at a single stroke... All this would require the erection of storehouses, no doubt rude enough, for the storage of fish, oil, etc., for shipment, as well as vats for the rendering of the blubber. There must also have been small huts for men to live in while on shore...and which might form the foundation of a permanent community."



In 1628 Samuel de Champlain was obliged to surrender his colony at Quebec to the Huguenot Kirke brothers. The major factor contributing to this capture of Quebec had been the interception and capture of the supply fleet under Admiral de Roquemont by the Kirke ships in Gaspé Bay. From 1628 until 1632 it was the flag of England that flew over Quebec and our history might have been quite different had not the English King, Charles I, at odds with his Parliament and ever desperate for funds, handed Quebec back to France in 1632 by the Treaty of St. Germain-en-Laye. This was the cue for the entrance of Nicolas Denys on the Canadian scene. He came to Acadia in 1633 with the Company of One Hundred Associates, a robust and ambitious man of thirty-five years of age, and for the next fifty-five years his life and career was interwoven with the fisheries and trade of the vast Acadian and Bay Chaleur region. For many of those years his role and authority were those set out in his Commission from Louis XIII, King of France, which stated, in part:

LOUIS, BY THE GRACE OF GOD, KING OF FRANCE & OF NAVARRE

TO ALL PRESENT AND TO COME

HAVING BEEN WELL INFORMED AND ASSURED AS TO THE LAUDABLE AND ESTEEMED ATTACHMENT, WORTH, AND DILIGENCE OF SIEUR NICOLAS DENYS.....WE HAVE, IN OUR CERTAIN KNOWLEDGE, FULL POWER AND ROYAL AUTHORITY ORDAINED AND ESTABLISHED THE AFORESAID SIEUR DENYS TO BE CONFIRMED, ESTABLISHED AND DECREED AS GOVERNOR & OUR LIEUTENANT GENERAL, REPRESENTING OUR PERSON IN ALL THE LANDS, TERRITORY, COASTS AND CONFINES OF THE GREAT BAY OF ST. LAWRENCE, FROM CAPE CANSEAU TO CAPE DES ROSIERS AND INCLUDING THE ISLANDS OF NEWFOUNDLAND, CAPE BRETON AND ST. JOHN (P.E.I.) & OTHER ADJACENT ISLANDS, TO THERE ESTABLISH OUR SOVEREIGN AUTHORITY...

AND MOREVER WE GRANT AND ATTRIBUTE TO THE SAID SIEUR DENYS THE RIGHT, PRIVILEGE AND AUTHORITY TO ESTABLISH A SEDENTARY FISHERIES

COMPANY FOR THE COD, SALMON, MACKEREL, HERRING, SARDINES, SEA-COWS, WALRUS & OTHER FISH THAT ARE TO BE FOUND IN ALL THE EXTENT OF THE AFORESAID LANDS & THE SHORES OF ACADIA, AS FAR AS VIRGINIA AND ITS ADJACENT ISLANDS...

SIGNED - LOUIS

Notwithstanding the lofty title and the sweeping powers granted by the King to Nicolas Denys and despite the energy and personal attention that he devoted to the fisheries, affairs did not prosper. Rivals and competitors gave him much trouble. His fishing stations were attacked, his men carried off, his vessels pillaged and, at one point Denys himself was carried to Port Royal in irons and confined in a dungeon. Many a man of lesser spirit and weaker constitution would have acknowledged defeat but Nicolas Denys remained undeterred by adversity. As his debts piled up and his Acadian enterprises failed he moved his centre of operations to Nepisiguit in Bay Chaleur and conducted the fisheries of Miscou. The French Government moved to repossess into the Crown Domain much of the immense territory that he had been granted originally. It is a measure of the spirit of Nicolas Denys that it was at the period when his fortunes were in decline that he wrote his two volume "DESCRIPTION GEOGRAPHIQUE ET HISTORIQUE DES COSTES DE L'AMERIQUE SEPTENTRIONALE, AVEC L'HISTOIRE DU PAIS" which remains as one of the most complete and authoritative works on the region, and particularly on the fisheries, that is available. The Champlain Society edition of this primary and fascinating work of Denys, to be found in major Canadian libraries, is complemented by an introduction of Dr. William F. Ganong, the eminent historian and author of New Brunswick.

In the reassignment of the vast territory granted by King Louis to Nicolas Denys his son Richard, Sieur de Fronsac, retained, in his own right the station of the Bay and River of Miramichi, fifteen leagues square, the

extended along the Gaspé shore from Cap Blanc on the south through all of Malbay out to Point St. Peter, and a distance of half a league beyond up Gaspé Bay. It was at the latter station that Pierre Denys, the nephew of Nicolas, was the active manager of the oldest and most important fishery of Gaspesia. Pierre had the support of prominent Quebec merchants, Charles Bazire and Charles Aubert de la Chesnaie, but neither of these men appear to have been directly involved with the operation in Gaspesia.

It is of particular interest to Gaspesians to recall the situation at the Percé and Barachois stations in the time of Pierre Denys. Dr. Ganong, who had access to documents of the Clairambault Collection in Paris, France, has written:

"...The grant of the Seigneurie of Isle Percée was confirmed by the Intendant du Chesneau on Nov. 2, 1676. The grant fell within the lands formerly ceded to Nicolas Denys, who protested against it; but the protest was in vain, since Denys' own grant was already in fact, if not in form, forfeit for non-fulfilment of its conditions... Pierre Denys was the active manager of the enterprise. In 1672 he went to Isle Percée to live, and in 1673 was joined by his family, who were accompanied by the Recollet Father Exuper Dethunes. No doubt their residence here was, however, temporary, and for the summer season. Documents of the Clairambault Collection, of date 1676, state that in September of that year, a brother and a son of Pierre Denys, with a Recollet Father and three other persons were at Isle Percée and that there was a large storehouse of fifty feet by twenty-five, a lodging for the commandant, and another, not yet finished for the Recollets, with 100 arpents of cleared land.

At Petite Rivière, which other documents locate at the bottom of the Baye des Morues (Malbay) two leagues from Isle Percée (thereby establishing its identity with the present community of Barachois)



was the winter settlement and general headquarters; that at Isle Percée being only a summer fishing station. Here was dwelling for fifteen persons, storehouses, stables, cleared lands, gardens, farming implements, boats, cattle, poultry, swine, and hosts of articles and stores of which a full list is given. This was the manor at which Father Chrestien Le Clercq, author of the NOUVELLE RELATION DE LA GASPESIE, found Monsieur Denys "very well lodged" when he visited in October, 1675. The basin, commonly called La Petite Rivière, was clearly that now called Barachois....it formed an admirable harbour for fishing boats. Here, accordingly, the establishment of Pierre Denys must have stood though there is now no trace or tradition thereof in the village....The site of the buildings at Isle Percée is not known but local tradition places them at the North Beach...."

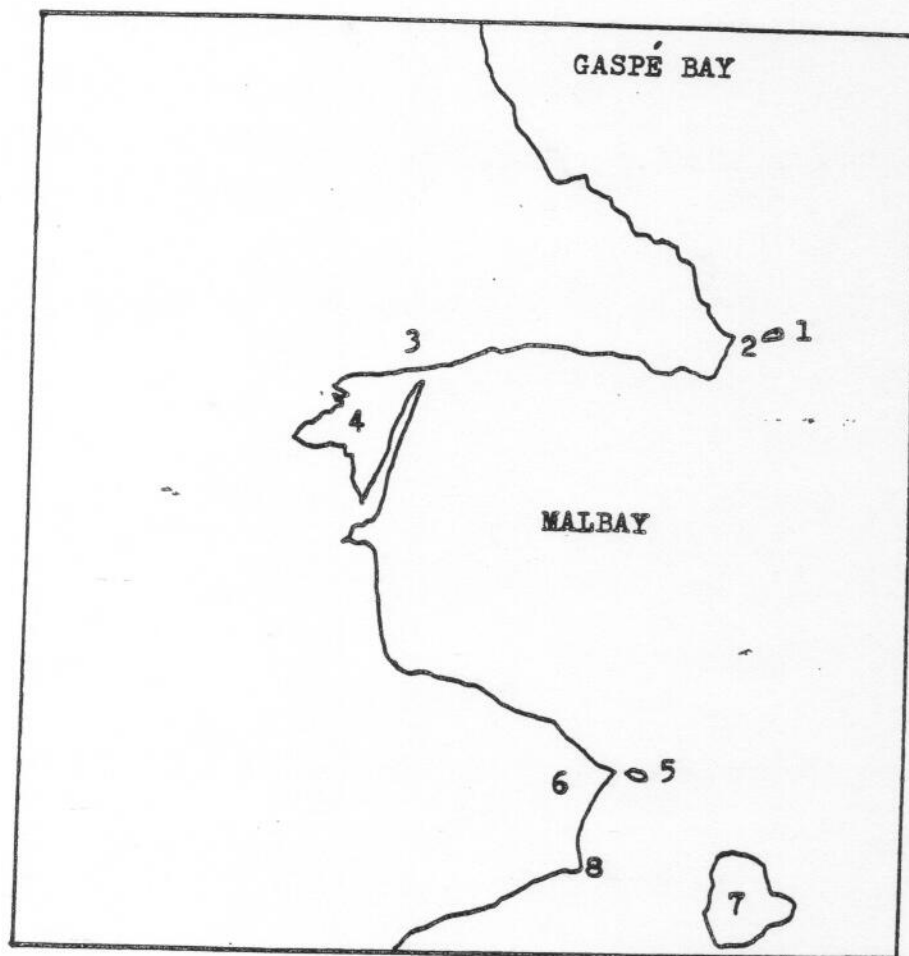
As had been the experience of his Uncle Nicolas, the fishery enterprise of Pierre Denys ran into hard times. About the year 1685 the Seigneurie returned to the hands of Nicolas and its management devolved to his son, Richard for there is record that residents of Perce who had been in the employ of Pierre Denys petitioned Richard for grants of their lands in 1685. Richard does not seem to have been an efficient manager. There is some evidence that in 1687 Boaventure, the son of Pierre, was in charge. As to Pierre Denys, he was afflicted with failing sight which led gradually to complete blindness. He died in 1708.

The sands of time were running out for the Denys establishments at Percé and Barachois. In the summer of 1690 both settlements were twice pillaged and destroyed. The first attack was made by New England privateers; the second by ships from the invasion fleet of Admiral Phips. Writing of Percé, the Abbe C.E.Roy states that from 1690 to 1760 there was no serious attempt to restore the establishment at Perce



The imagination is stirred in recalling the long and interesting story of the Denys family in the Gaspesia of three centuries ago. It is to be hoped that the significance of their historic role, not only to Gaspesia but to Canada, will win wider recognition and steps taken to reconstruct their pioneer establishments at Percé and Barachois to portray to visitors to Gaspesia what life was like in these 17th century settlements."

A SKETCH SHOWING THE DENYS SEIGNEURIE OF ISLE PERCÉE  
AND THE LOCATION OF PERCÉ FISHING STATION AND THE  
SETTLEMENT AT BARACHOIS.



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|--------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Plato Island    | 5. Percé Rock            |
| 2. Point St. Peter | 6. Percé Fishing Station |
| 3. Denys Manor     | 7. Bonaventure Island    |
| 4. Barachois       | 8. White Head            |

