

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

ISLAND IN "THE SEA OF FISH"

A recall of Heron Island in the
Bay of Chaleur.

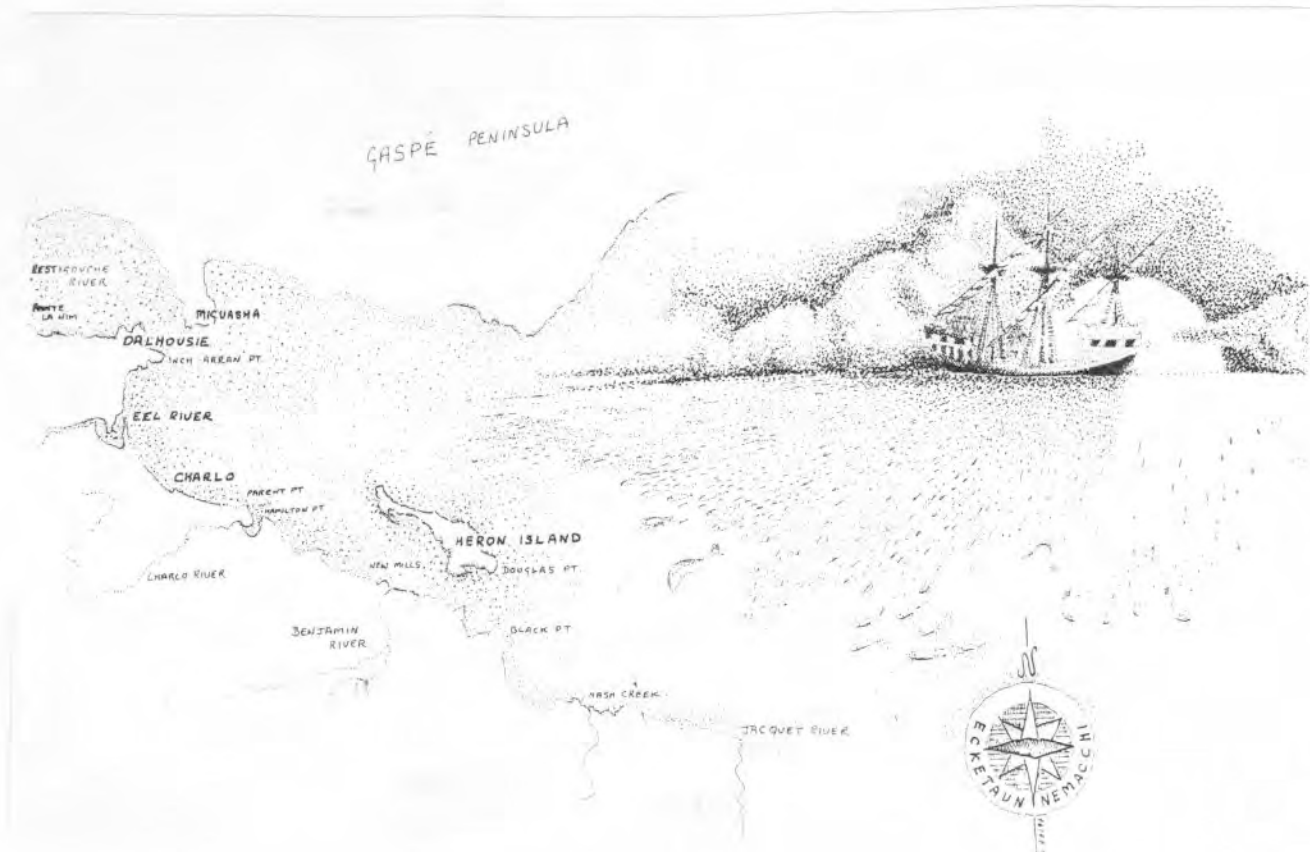
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ISLAND IN "THE SEA OF FISH"

PREFACE

A report, THE GASPE FISHERY, by Moses Perley was published by SPEC on January 12, 1979 as part of the GASPE OF YESTERDAY series. A native of New Brunswick, Moses Perley was recognized as a leading authority on the Maritime fishery. An account of his remarkable career can be found in the Canadian Biographical Dictionary.

The following recall of Heron Island in Chaleur Bay may help to provide a balance to the many references in GASPE OF YESTERDAY to Bonaventure Island and its fishery. The recorded history of both islands goes back to the voyage of Jacques Cartier into Bay Chaleur in 1534 though European fishermen may well have known these waters for previous decades. Cartier's account of his voyage in Bay Chaleur recalls that during his time at "conche Saint Martin" (Port Daniel) he and his men went westward up the Bay in ship boats some 75 miles to the Restigouche estuary visiting the present sites of Paspébiac, Carleton, Escuminac and Dalhousie. Only after establishing that no seaway lay to the westward did Cartier sail eastward from Port Daniel to Percé, Bonaventure Island and Gaspé.



HERON ISLAND: ISLAND IN "THE SEA OF FISH"

The Bay of Chaleur possesses many advantages for the prosecution of the fisheries. The whole Bay may be considered one great harbour, as throughout its entire breadth and extent there is not a single rock, reef or shoal. During the summer it literally swarms with fish of every description known on the shores of British North America: and its ancient Indian name of "Ecketaun Nemacchi" — "The Sea of Fish" — well denotes its character.

— Moses Perley (1852)
*Report on the Sea and River
Fisheries of New Brunswick*

The most significant island in this "Sea of Fish" is Heron Island which lies between New Brunswick and the Gaspé coast where the Bay of Chaleur begins to narrow to meet the Restigouche River. This long and narrow island (about five miles by one mile or less) is roughly two miles off the New Brunswick coast and more than triple that distance from Quebec. Because of its protected location and excellent fishing, comparable for these reasons to the Northumberland Strait islands of Cocagne and Shediac, it seems an ideal habitat for herons who appear from earliest recorded times to have been associated with this island. The Indians too found this place greatly to their liking, as did white immigrants who eventually, like the herons and the Indians, settled here because of the excellent fishing and the shelter it afforded.

Settlers or visitors, whether French or English, have consistently kept the same name for the island. In the earliest Louisbourg records frequent brief references are made to voyages undertaken to 'La Baie des Chaleurs,' where 'l'île-aux Herons' was sighted; and late eighteenth-century accounts use the same spelling as the Louisbourg records when referring to the granting of this island — together with some of the nearby mainland, including the land on which the town of Carleton now stands — to l'Abbé Bourg, the first Acadian priest serving as missionary in the Bay of Chaleur region.

L'Abbé Bourg had this land pressed upon him in the 1780's as a reward for quelling an Indian uprising. Apparently only his timely intervention saved bloodshed. Several sources indicate that no other white man of this time possessed so extensive a knowledge of the Indian languages and customs or was able to establish so strong a rapport with the native people as l'Abbé Bourg. Ironically, however, although Sir Richard Hughes made a great fanfare, which resounded from Hughes' own residence in Halifax to the good Abbé's residence at Carleton (on the Gaspé across from Heron Island), trumpeting Bourg's accomplishment and his own delight in rewarding him, he never actually gave Bourg a deed to the land he seemed eager to confer on him. Bourg, moreover, who was by all accounts an unworldly man, appears to have been so concerned with attending to the spiritual welfare of his own people and the Indians under his jurisdiction that he had no time or energy to attend to lands on Heron Island.

It was not, therefore, until almost mid-nineteenth century that Heron Island was divided into twelve farms of unequal acreages stretching from shore to shore (north to south). These grants were taken up by Anglophone families. The chief occupation of these early settlers was fishing. As Moses Perley pointed out in his 1852 report: "There is excellent herring fishing around this island...lobster and sea trout are abundant." Nevertheless, Mr. Perley was upset by some of the inequalities governing the fishing here even at such an early date. The best fishing, he noted, was between the island and the New Brunswick mainland, and the lots already granted covered all the beaches, leaving no fishing stations available for newcomers.

Mr. Perley also quoted remarks made by a nearby mainland resident — a Mr. Harvey of Nash's Creek — that Americans should be allowed to "prosecute the fisheries (here), as they would teach the young men the latest and most approved modes of fishing, from ignorance of which they could not at present follow fishing profitably." That Mr. Perley did not protest against this viewpoint is surprising, given his knowledge of the difficulties resident fishermen of both Grand Manan and Miscou were having at this time with American interlopers and his perspicacity in spotting and calling attention to troublesome situations in advance.¹

The American boats which fished so close to Miscou at this time and periodically entered the Bay of Chaleur were chiefly after cod, since the cod in the Bay was reputed to be of superior quality for shipping to the Mediterranean markets where it was much in demand. The Bay of Chaleur codfish were smaller than those caught elsewhere and were said to remain white and delicate even after being salted and dried.

Apart from its proximity to fine fishing, Heron Island has never had much in common with the larger neighboring island at the mouth of the Bay. On windswept Miscou, sparse evergreens struggle valiantly to hold their ground; on sheltered Heron, lush stands of cedars, poplars, birches, maples, as well as spruce and fir, reach upward and outward as they vie with one another for a place in the sun. Miscou's many bogs produce ground-hugging vegetation — pitcher plants, cranberries, and bakeapples: Heron's well-drained upland meadows generate shoulder-high grasses, multitudes of wildflowers and raspberry bushes.

Heron Island, like Merigomish Island in Pictou County or Indian Island near Richibucto, was, understandably, a favorite haunt of the Micmacs. Here they dwelt under seeming ideal conditions until the coming of the white man caused them to abandon their beautiful island forever. The repercussions from this first clash between native people and European mariners proved disastrous for all concerned.

According to the story, the tragedy began in 1500 when an unscrupulous Portuguese adventurer, Gaspar Corte-Real, arrived in the Bay of Chaleur. Going ashore on the Gaspé coast opposite Heron Island, he and his crew piled a number of the chiefs with alcohol until they were hopelessly drunk — then took them prisoner and transported them to Europe to sell as slaves. Apparently not at all concerned that this treachery might boomerang.

Corte-Real returned to the Bay of Chaleur the following summer — this time to Heron Island. Since the Indians there seemed friendly, he assumed that either they knew nothing of the kidnapping which had taken place on the nearby Gaspé coast the previous summer — or that, if they knew, they did not care. Thus Corte-Real and his men, relaxing all vigilance, established themselves on the island and focused their attention on trading with the Indians. The Indians, however, were both cunning and more unforgiving than they seemed: they were merely biding their time for vengeance. One dark night when the Portuguese were asleep, the Indians stole into the Europeans' dwelling, murdering everyone except Corte-Real. For him they had devised a punishment in keeping with the crime he had committed against their people the preceding summer. Taking Corte-Real to a rock which was not submerged at low tide, they secured him to it and then abandoned him so that he would have a number of hours to reflect on his wicked life and approaching death before the tide rose over him.



Gaspar Corte-Real's death did not, however, put an end to unpleasant foreign intrusions, as no doubt the Indians had hoped, for the following summer (1502) Miguel Corte-Real, Gaspar's brother, came to find out what had happened to the captain and crew of the first trading vessel. Almost at once he spotted the *Caravel* moored, still intact, off the middle part of the island. As he saw no sign of life aboard, he sailed his own ship closer. Suddenly a large number of Indians shot out from shore in their canoes, clambered quickly aboard the vessel and at once massacred everyone in sight.

Seeing the fate of their fellows, the captain and surviving crew barricaded themselves in the cabin and below decks with all the weapons they could lay hands on. However, the *Caravel*, left untended, began to drift out to sea, and the sailors surmised that they were doomed. Before making a final rush on the Indians on deck, the Portuguese are supposed to have said a prayer which included the vengeful threat that, if they died, they would return to haunt the Bay of Chaleur for one thousand years.

During the final confrontation between the Portuguese and Indians the boat caught fire. Soon the sails and masts were ablaze and the gutted boat disappeared quickly beneath the waters of the Bay. Only one Indian survived to tell the story.

We were told that even after all this the Indians were not left in peace because from this time on they kept seeing the burning ship bearing down upon them — particularly on the eve of a storm. Increasingly terrified by these strange and frequent reappearances of the lost ship, they abandoned Heron Island and went to live on the banks of the Restigouche River.

Ever since this time the burning ship has been spotted sailing up and down the Bay in all seasons of the year, though it is most often visible, some say, just before a storm. Hundreds of men, women and children have reported watching the vessel burn and at length sink into the sea.² Many contemporary viewers seem as puzzled and upset by the phenomenon as the Indians nearly five centuries ago are supposed to have been.

The settlers who finally became established on Heron Island seem to have been little troubled by ghosts of the past. Neither the restless spirits of the displaced Micmacs nor the vengeful spectres of the murdered Portuguese returned to mar the tranquility of their lives or the abundance of the harvests from land and sea. As former residents have been quick to emphasize: "Life on Heron Island was idyllic."

One man, Stanley LaPointe, who takes his family back every summer to camp on the beach below his family's former farmhouse, remarked: "Nowhere else has the same feeling of peace and plenty for me.... Even in the Depression with eleven kids in our family we always had enough. Like everyone else on the island, we had a good house, some animals, a great garden, berries galore, and lots of fish and firewood. Of course my father seemed almost rich at the time because, in addition to everything else that I have mentioned, he had two concurrent government jobs — lighthouse keeper and postmaster."

"Yes, we were lucky," he continued. "But now it's best that no one lives here. I'm glad the island is deserted. This way there's no way of it getting spoiled."

Mr. LaPointe did not elaborate on this last remark, but one only needs to see what has happened to nearby parts of the

mainland — at Belledune, for example — to know what he means. Not so long ago that was once a lovely spot too.

Because the whole Bay is, as Mr. Perley noted, such a fine and safe natural harbor of immense proportions, industries have seen the immediate advantages of locating here. By putting up ugly, sprawling concrete buildings, crowned with immense smokestacks and flanked by black-topped and machine-littered acres, they have already marred the scenery of one of the world's great natural beauty spots. Heron Island has fortunately been spared this sort of 'progress'.

However, like the rest of the Bay, the waters around Heron Island are slowly but surely being polluted by the many chemicals which industries all along the Bay spew daily into the once pure waters. Not only are the fish less numerous than they once were, but questions have been raised about the toxic levels of contaminants in the survivors.³ Unless we can somehow manage to alter aspects of our development, "Echetaun Nemaachi", or "The Sea of Fish", will be nothing but a vague and haunting memory.

For a detailed account of the problems which the Miscou fishermen faced, see Perley's 1852 *Report on the Sea and River Fisheries of New Brunswick*, and, for a record of the difficulties in the Grand Manan fisheries, see Perley's 1850 *Report on the Fisheries of Grand Manan*.

Actually, American boats had been coming to the Bay of Chaleur for the best part of the hundred years before Perley made his observations and wrote his report in 1852. This "Sea of Fish" was for years the primary destination of New England fishing boats and Jersey merchants alike. One of these merchants, Charles Robin, in his *Journal* (much of which is a day to day account of his business trips from Arichat, Isle Madame, Cape Breton to the Bay of Chaleur during the years 1767-1769) tells of the many schooners and whalers he observed each spring anchored between Canso and Isle Madame waiting for the drift ice to shift so that they could pass through into the Northumberland Straits. Once into the Straits, they steered for Pictou Island, much as earlier fishermen along the Cape Breton coast had been guided by Scatarie Island as a landmark. However, unlike their European predecessors on the Cape Breton coast, there are no records of this new wave of transient fishermen either stopping on the island or coming to grief on its coast. Intent on reaching the "Sea of Fish", the only impediments once the ice had gone from the usually tranquil Northumberland Straits were sand bars off Cape Tormentine. Thus, reaching their favorite fishing grounds was usually not a difficult or dangerous undertaking.