

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

THE GREAT GASPÉ FAMINES  
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OF  
\*\*

1816 AND 1833  
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TWICE IN THE FIRST THREE DECADES OF THE  
19th CENTURY THE PEOPLE OF GASPESIA HAD  
TO FACE THE GRIM SPECTRE OF FAMINE.

FAILURE OF THE CROPS OF GRAIN AND OF  
POTATOES AND A COINCIDENT DECLINE OF  
THE FISHERY PRECIPITATED THE CRISES IN  
A DISTRICT THAT NEVER ENJOYED AN ABUND-  
ANCE OF PROVISIONS.

BEHIND THE WORDS OF THE FOLLOWING  
PETITIONS, REPORTS AND LETTERS WE  
CAN GLIMPSE, ACROSS THE SPAN OF YEARS,  
THE DISTRESS AND CONCERN OF OUR ANCESTORS.

KEN ANNETT

THE FAMINE OF 1816

November, 1816

PETITION OF THE DISTRESSED POOR IN THE DISTRICT OF GASPÉ

TO HIS EXCELLENCY

SIR JOHN COAPE SHERBROOKE

KNIGHT GRAND CROSS OF THE MOST HONORABLE MILITARY  
ORDER OF THE BATH, COMMANDER GENERAL AND GOVERNOR  
IN CHIEF IN AND FOR THE PROVINCE OF LOWER CANADA.

May it please Your Excellency,

The Petition of the undersigned Inhabitants of the Inferior  
District of Gaspé in favour of the Distressed Poor in the  
District.

That your Petitioners, having learned that the Government, on  
account of the distress caused by the failure of Crops in several  
of the Parishes below Québec, had aided the distressed Poor in  
these Parishes by giving them provisions, take liberty to inform  
Your Excellency that the Crops of Potatoes and all kinds of Grain  
have failed entirely in their District, and that in consequence  
distress is extreme among the majority of the Inhabitants,  
particularly in Bay Chaleur between Point Mackerel and Ristigouche,  
where the principal means of Winter support come from Agricultural  
products, the Fisheries in this part of the District being a  
secondary object.

Your Petitioners, having no information other than the good  
intentions of Government, cannot give the exact population of the  
District and the number in great need, and the season being  
advanced they could not do so before the close of navigation but  
they believe it is not exaggerated to put the population at  
eight hundred families, including the Indians at New Richmond and  
Ristigouche, and of that number they estimate that at least three  
hundred and fifty families with an average of five persons in each

2.

are in real and absolute need. Three hundred of those families, including the distressed Indians, are in Bay Chaleur and the other fifty families are to the East of Mackerel Point and in Gaspé Bay. Your Petitioners, in consequence, very humbly seek the extension of Government favour to the Poor of their District in real and absolute need and humbly take the liberty to show that which they believe is required, together with the Meat and Fish which can be obtained, to prevent death from famine this Winter, namely, for five months ;-

2,625 quintals of Biscuit

300 quintals of Barley or Rice

This would provide about a pound of Biscuit and two ounces of Barley or Rice per person per day.

The whole very respectfully submitted to Your Excellency by your Petitioners who pray, humbly, that Your Excellency will take it in consideration and take such action that Your Excellency, in his wisdom, will consider necessary.

(Signed)

Azariah Pritchard, (Sr.)

Francois Sire

Edw'd I. Man

Aug. Poirier

Henry Johnston, Gaspé Bay

J.P. and Militia Captain.

#### THE RESPONSE

The speed of response to this urgent plea was commendable. The Committee for the Relief of Poor Parishes, no doubt aware that the close of navigation to Bay Chaleur was imminent, shipped 100 barrels of flour to New Carlisle and 120 barrels to Bay Chaleur on November 23rd., 1816. The arrival of this much needed flour at New Carlisle and the arrangements for its distribution have been described in a SPEC article by D.R. Garret entitled ; - NEW CARLISLE: SOURCES OF GENEALOGICAL INFORMATION PRIOR TO 1820, published July 12, 1979. The 120 barrels of flour shipped to Bay Chaleur would most likely have been off-loaded at New Richmond or Carleton. It would be most interesting find a RELIEF BOOK for the distribution of the flour in that area, if such was kept.

OTHER CONSEQUENCES

The reports of the Committee for the Relief of Poor Parishes in 1816/1817 reveal that the purchase and distribution of the provisions necessary to sustain life in the distressed Parishes over the winter of 1816 was only a part of the need. Stocks of grain and potatoes had been completely used up - no seed grain or seed potatoes remained in the whole region to the East of Quebec. Much of the livestock had been slaughtered for food. Thousands of pounds sterling had to be budgeted by Government to provide the seed and stock required to restore production and prevent another famine crisis. The Committee of A.L. Juchereau Duchesnay, M.N. Perceval, and Olivier Perrault did a remarkable job of meeting these urgent, widespread needs. It may be of interest to note that M. Duchesnay would become known personally to the men of Gaspesia as one of the Gaspé Land Claims Commissioners in 1819/20.

THE FAMINE OF 1833

LETTER OF JOHN LE BOUTILLIER, ESQ., WITH MEMORANDUM OF THE STATE OF THE COUNTY OF GASPE.

November 11, 1833

Lieut.-Colonel Craig,  
Civil Secretary,  
Governor-General's Office,  
Québec.

Sir,

In compliance with your request I have the honor to hand to you herewith enclosed, a memorandum of the state of the County of Gaspé, in consequence of the failure of the Land Crops, and the unproductive Fishery of the past Season, in a List of the population of the different Settlements in all that extensive tract of Coast, which is in a more deplorable state of destitution than it was in

1816, when, providentially for the Inhabitants, the Government came forward to their relief with a supply of Flour, before the close of the Navigation.

I have the honour to be etc.etc.

(Signed) John LeBoutillier.

ENCLOSED MEMORANDUM OF THE STATE OF THE COUNTY OF GASPE

- NEWPORT Contains a population of about 170 souls; their occupation is almost exclusively confined to the fishing and they have thereby secured a bare sufficiency of Provisions for the winter.
- GRAND RIVER Population about 300 souls; their occupation is fishing and farming; but owing to the distress and the destitute state of the Country last Winter, they could not reserve any sort of Grain or Potatoes to resume the pursuits of Farming last Spring - and by the Fishing only about 10 families have secured a sufficiency of Provisions for this Winter; the rest of that population not for more than about 3 months at most.
- LITTLE RIVER Population about 80 souls; occupations the same as Grand River; could not procure either Grain or Potatoes to plant last Spring; but they have by the Fishing secured nearly a sufficiency of Provisions for this Winter.
- BONAVENTURE ISLAND Population about 100 souls Wholly employed a Fishing the past Season. For want of Grain and Potatoes last Spring, of this number only 2 or 3 families have a sufficiency of Provisions for this Winter, the rest of the population not for more than 3 months of it at most.
- PERCE Population about 700 souls; occupations Fishing and Farming. Here, about 3000 Minots of Potatoes were imported from Jersey last Spring by the House of Messrs Chs. Robin and Co., for the express purpose of enabling the Inhabitants to plant again, as all the Cellars had previously been thrown open to meet the pressing necessities of a starving People, but unfortunately the most of them perished in the ground

so that the Crop is, as it were, a total failure. Grain they had none of any sort to sow their fields with; of this population only about 20 families have provisions enough for this Winter - the rest less successful a Fishing have provisions for little more than one half of it.

MAL BAY  
AND  
POINT ST.  
PETER

Population upwards of 300 souls chiefly engaged in the Fishing carried on there; they have no Land Crops and the Fishery having been very unproductive there is not provision in these two settlements to meet the necessities of the Inhabitants for more than about 4 months.

DOUGLASS  
TOWN

Population upwards of 200 souls; their occupation is chiefly Farming, but having failed in procuring seeds last Spring, they are amongst the most needy on the Coast.

GASPE

Population about 600. Their occupation the same as Douglass Town, and much in the same state of destitution.

GRAND  
GREVE

Population about 180, generally well supplied with Provisions for this Winter.

CAPE ROZIER  
GRIFFON COVE  
FOX RIVER

Population about 250, chiefly Fishers, very generally destitute of Provisions for this Winter; with the exception of about 5 or 6 families no means of procuring any.

(Signed) John Le Boutillier  
Member for Gaspé

TO HIS EXCELLENCY, LORD AYLMER, K.C.B.  
GOVERNOR IN CHIEF OF THE PROVINCE OF LOWER CANADA

THE HUMBLE MEMORIAL OF THE UNDERSIGNED MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY FOR THE COUNTY OF GASPE, MOST RESPECTFULLY SHEWETH :-

That Your Excellency's Memorialists are applied to by their constituents the Inhabitants of the County of Gaspé, who are now suffering from famine occasioned by a failure in the Crops and Fisheries of this year in the said County, to represent their distressed situation and pray for relief for them.

That it should be the duty of Your Excellency's Memorialists to make this their humble representation to the Provincial Parliament but that such representation could not be in time to afford relief to the sufferers.

That the Memorialists take upon themselves to vouch for the accuracy of the statements contained in the accompanying Affidavits, to which they beg leave to refer; and being convinced of the goodness and humanity of Your Excellency, humbly pray that Your Excellency will be pleased to arrest or alleviate the sufferings by Your Excellency's Memorialists represented, in causing to be sent down to their constituents a few hundred Barrels of Flour, or such other relief as to Your Excellency in Your wisdom may deem meet; and Your Excellency's Memorialists and their constituents, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

Québec. 15 Nov. 1833

(Signed) John Le Boutillier  
William Power

AFFIDAVIT ENCLOSED - 1.

Henry Bisset Johnston of Point St. Peter in the County of Gaspé, Esq., being duly sworn, deposes and saith:

That owing to the failure in the Fisheries, and also of the Crops of last Summer in the County of Gaspé, the Inhabitants of the said County are left destitute of the means of subsistence during the ensuing Winter.

That taking into account the whole of the Bread Stuffs and Food, Provisions in the Merchant's Stores at the County of Gaspé, and in the said County, there will not be a sufficient supply for the Inhabitants beyond three months from this date.

That owing to the aforesaid failure in the Fisheries, the Merchants of the said County have not imported, or were unable to import, the usual supply of Flour and other Provisions; and that before the Deponent had left the said County (about a month ago) a famine had already commenced amongst the poorest of the Inhabitants, who then had nothing whatever to eat but Fish, of which even they will be deprived when Winter sets in.

That in the said County of Gaspé upwards of 30,000 Barrels of

Potatoes are raised generally every season; but that the failure in this article of food has been this year so great that not above 2000 Barrels have been collected.

Deponent further says that unless some speedy relief be forthwith granted to the poor Inhabitants of the said County, he verily believes that many of them will inevitably perish of hunger during the ensuing Winter; further Deponent saith not, and hath signed.

Henry B. Johnston

Sworn before me this 14 Nov. 1833, Louis Panet, Justice of the Peace.

AFFIDAVIT ENCLOSED - 2.

Abraham C. Coffin and Richard Annett, both of the South-West Arm of Gaspé Bay, Farmers and Fishermen, being severally and duly sworn, do, and each of them for himself doth depose and say:-

[ The affidavit of Abraham Coffin and Richard Annett reflected the same state of distress described above by Henry Johnston and stressed that, "...unless some speedy relief be forthwith afforded to the Inhabitants of the said County, a destructive famine must inevitably cause many of the said Inhabitants to perish during the approaching Winter..."

(Signed) A.C.Coffin

Richard Annett

Sworn before me this 15 Nov. 1833, John Le Boutillier, J.P.

ACTION TAKEN BY LORD AYLMER

On receipt of the Petition and enclosed Affidavits above, Lord Aylmer wrote privately to William Price of Québec for his confidential opinion on the seriousness of the situation in the County of Gaspé. As one involved in lumbering and shipping in the Lower St. Lawrence Region William Price had access to information from a wide circle of business and professional men. Within two days he replied to Lord Aylmer, stating in part:-



"...From the accounts I have received from various persons, it would appear that, unhappily, there is too much foundation for Your Lordship's anxiety on the situation. I hear from all who have arrived lately from these parts, or who have received direct intelligence, that the Crops there have totally failed and that the Potato Crop, a chief dependance of the Gaspé people, is quite lost, these misfortunes following a still greater one, the failure of the Summer fishing. Supplies of food to make up these deficiencies can be drawn from no other source than the River St. Lawrence..."

REPLY OF LORD AYLMER TO THE PETITION OF THE MEMBERS FOR GASPÉ.

Castle of St. Lewis,

16 Nov. 1833

Gentlemen,

The Governor in Chief, having had your Memorial under consideration, has directed me to acquaint you in answer, that he has no public money at his disposal applicable to the purpose therein contemplated; but that in consideration of the urgency of the case His Lordship has resolved upon sending down to Gaspé a supply of Provisions for the relief of the Inhabitants at his own cost; and the quantity recommended by you has been this day shipped accordingly.

(Signed) H. Craig,  
Sec'y

#### RELIEF ARRANGEMENTS

At the request of the Civil Secretary, Lieut.-Col. Craig, the following Gaspé men formed a Society for the management and distribution of the 300 Barrels of Flour shipped for the relief of the distressed Inhabitants: Messrs Johnston, Wilson, O'Hara and Fauvel. Gaspé Basin received 100 Barrels while Grand Grève, Point St. Peter and Percé each received 50 Barrels. It was strongly recommended that distribution of this emergency stock commence

only when all provisions on hand were exhausted; that care be taken to avoid hoarding by providing relief to each family only as needed; and that payment be required either in money or by note at the same price as normally charged by local merchants.

#### THE 1833 FAMINE WIDESPREAD

The famine of 1833 was by no means limited to the District of Gaspé. Records of the Québec Legislature show that there was much distress in all of the communities to the East of Québec on both sides of the River St. Lawrence. Many parishes kept and submitted to the Government detailed lists of those receiving relief - lists that provide an interesting source of information on family history. The related accounts for the purchase of provisions by the Government also provide insight into the commercial firms of that day and their sources of supply.