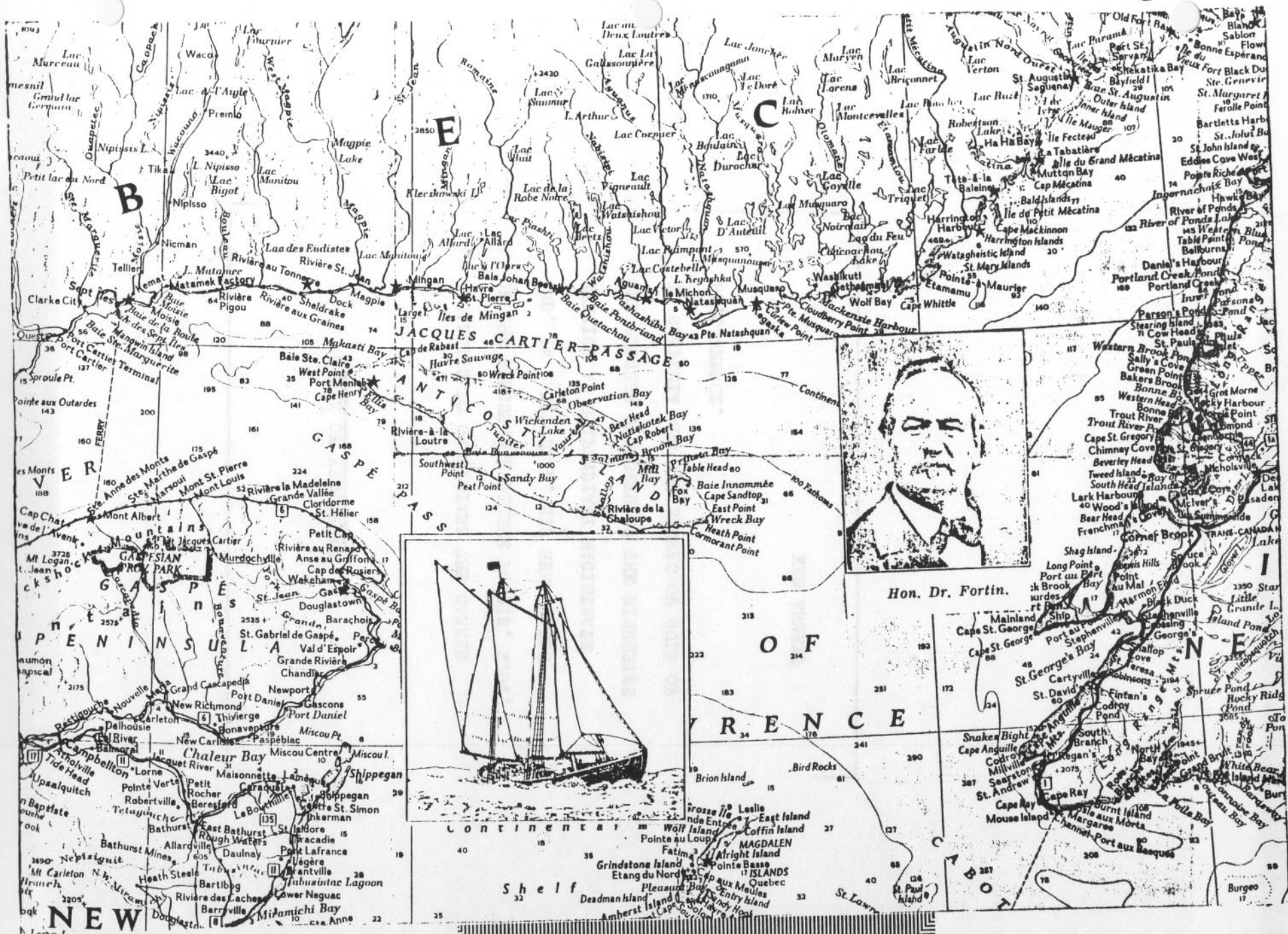


GASPE' OF YESTERDAY

RECALLING TO GASPESIANS THE CAREER  
OF THE HONOURABLE PIERRE FORTIN, M.D.,  
AND, IN PARTICULAR, HIS REMARKABLE  
SERVICE AS STIPENDIARY MAGISTRATE  
AND PIONEER OVERSEER OF THE FISHERIES  
IN GASPEZIA AND THE SHORES OF GULF OF  
ST.LAWRENCE.

KEN ANNETT



THE REGION SERVED BY DR. FORTIN AS PIONEER OVERSEER OF THE FISHERIES AND MAGISTRATE.

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

DR. PIERRE FORTIN - MAGISTRATE AND OVERSEER OF THE FISHERIES FOR THE LOWER RIVER AND GULF OF ST. LAWRENCE.

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From the time of his appointment, in 1852, as Stipendiary Magistrate and Overseer of the Fisheries for the Lower River and Gulf of St. Lawrence, Dr. Pierre Fortin was undoubtedly one of the most widely known and respected public figures in the District of Gaspé and throughout the region of the Gulf. For fifteen seasons, from the year of his first voyage in the Coast Guard schooner, "ALLIANCE", during the fishing season of 1852, he maintained a busy schedule of annual, marine patrols to the communities and fishing stations of Gaspé, the Magdalen Islands and the North Shore. Over those fifteen years, Dr. Fortin came to know personally most of the leading men of his time who lived along the one thousand two hundred miles of the Gulf coastline. His armed schooner, "LA CANADIENNE", was a familiar sight to the fishermen and seamen of the Gulf and in every harbour from the Basin of Gaspé to Blanc Sablon.

Besides being a Magistrate, charged with enforcing the provisions of the Fisheries Act, Dr. Fortin enforced Magisterial authority throughout the unorganized areas of the vast Gulf region. He aided both the Customs as Preventive Officer and the district Sheriffs, keeping down the trade in liquor and maintaining law and order among the maritime and fishing population. He controlled foreign vessels frequenting Gulf waters. As Overseer of the Fisheries he issued seasonal fishing licenses, collected fees, adjudged differences, protected the licensees of the Crown, visited Indian settlements and compiled comprehensive annual reports for the Government on the state of the fisheries and the general conditions prevailing throughout the region. These reports, for the years from his appointment in 1852 until his election as Member of Parliament for Gaspe, in 1867, are a rich source of information on the people, places and conditions in Gaspesia and the Gulf for that period. Future issues

The career of Dr. Pierre Fortin as the pioneer Overseer of the Fisheries has added significance and interest for Gaspésians. Later in time his work was continued by a well-known resident of Gaspé Basin, Dr. (Commander) William Wakeham. Together, the careers of these two distinguished men spanned sixty years of outstanding public service. Their contributions to the control and protection of the Fisheries were vital to the general welfare and the economic development of Gaspesia and the Gulf.

Pierre Fortin was born at Vercheres, Quebec, in December 1823. He may have inherited his interest and aptitude for a maritime career from his father's Norman ancestors and from the Breton ancestors of his mother, Julie Duvernay Fortin. A promising student from his early years, young Pierre was sent to study at the Montreal Seminary. From there he entered the Medical School of McGill College. In 1845, at the age of twenty-two, he graduated from McGill with his M.D. degree.

At the time when Dr. Fortin graduated from McGill, the Province of Quebec was facing a catastrophic immigrant problem. Shiploads of immigrants, many of them seeking refuge from famine in Ireland, were arriving by the thousands in the River St. Lawrence. They brought with them the dreaded disease of cholera. A Quarantine Station was established on Grosse Isle, down river from the seaport of Quebec, and there doctors and members of the clergy attempted to cope with an unprecedented and tragic situation of disease and death among these unfortunate people. Fear gripped the population of the St. Lawrence valley as reports were circulated of the deaths of immigrants by thousands. In this situation the decision of young Dr. Fortin to join the hard-pressed medical staff on Grosse Isle provides significant insight as to his courage and character. He served on Grosse Isle during the terrible cholera years of 1847 and 1848. Among his medical colleagues in that service was Dr. George M. Douglas of Quebec. Dr. Douglas had served previously in Gaspesia

at Restigouche and New Carlisle. It may have been from his conversations with Dr. Douglas that Dr. Pierre Fortin's interest in Gaspesia and its people was aroused.

Those who served on Grosse Isle and were fortunate to survive the cholera years, were profoundly affected by the trauma of their experience. In the case of Dr. Fortin his decision was to seek a new career outside of the medical profession. In 1849 he returned to Montreal where he became involved in raising a special mounted police force to support the civil authority in dealing with a situation that then bordered on anarchy. The roots of that situation were to be found in the Rebellion of 1837 and its bitter legacy of civil strife. In 1849 a Bill had been introduced in the Assembly which then met in the Capital, Montreal, to compensate those who had suffered property losses during the 1837 Rebellion. This Bill aroused immediate and ferocious opposition with the rallying cry of, "NO PAY TO REBELS". When the Governor, Lord Elgin, went to the Parliament Building to sign the Bill, he was mobbed and his carriage stoned. Riots ensued. The Parliament Building was assaulted by the mob and burned. It was in the face of this serious threat to civil authority and public order that Dr. Fortin's troop of mounted police served to quell the riots and to restore law and order. By his courage and firmness in action, Dr. Fortin displayed the personal qualities and convictions that would distinguish his subsequent career as a Magistrate and Overseer of the Fisheries in Gaspesia and the Gulf.

To gain perspective of the task Dr. Fortin was to face as pioneer Overseer of the Fisheries, it is pertinent to recall, briefly, the situation that prevailed prior to his appointment. Following the Conquest of 1760, one of the earliest British subjects to engage in the Gaspesian fishery was Charles Robin of Jersey, who came into Bay Chaleur in 1764. Robin was soon reporting trouble from the interference of American fishermen and privateers. Two of

his vessels, the "BEE" and the "HOPE" were boldly seized by American privateers at his Paspébiac fishing station. Another Jersey firm, the Janvrins, operating in the Magdalen Islands, reported that the very existence of British fishing firms was threatened by the Americans. Following the difficult years of the War of 1812-1814, a Fisheries Convention had been signed with the United States but this Treaty had been disregarded by the fishermen of New England who had flocked to the rich fishing grounds of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in even greater numbers. In 1823, Mr. E. I. Mann of Restigouche stated that: "...the Americans encroach on our shores contrary to law." On the North Shore Mr. James McTavish pleaded for a regulation to prevent the Americans from monopolizing and ruining the cod and salmon fishery. Despite the adoption, in 1823, of the Act entitled: "For the better regulation of the Fisheries in the Inferior District of Gaspé." and occasional intervention by ships of the Royal Navy on patrol in the Gulf, the situation of the fisheries remained virtually out of control. Thus, in 1849, Moses Perley was to report that: "...From seven to eight hundred sail of American fishing vessels enter the Gulf of St. Lawrence annually; and scattering over the whole of its vast extent, with little heed to the limits to which they are restricted by Treaty, pursue their business unmolested..." In Bay Chaleur, Joseph Marr of Carleton deplored the decline of the cod fishery and noted: "...American fishing vessels which frequent this Bay...injure cod fishing by throwing over the bones and offal of the fish they take..."

Nor was the illegal American fishing the only problem to the fishery of Gaspesia and the Gulf. Along the coasts of the region lawlessness was rife and strife was general over competition for the choice fishing stations. The rich resource of the salmon fishery was unregulated. The traditionally abundant stocks of salmon were being depleted through unscrupulous exploitation of the river estuaries and spawning grounds. Local law and customs officers,

few in number, and lacking support from the distant government of Quebec, were unable to cope with the urgent need to impose law and order. In short, the situation of the fisheries in Gaspesia and the Gulf was serious and posed a stern challenge for regulation and control - a challenge to be taken up and met by Dr. Pierre Fortin as Overseer of the Fisheries from 1852.

From the outset of his first voyage in the armed schooner, "ALLIANCE", Dr. Fortin set the tone of disciplined purpose that was to be the hallmark of his career as Overseer of the Fisheries and that would win for him respect on the coasts of Gaspesia, the Masdalens and North Shore. He required that the officers and seamen of his schooner be in uniform and that they be ready at all times to effect seizure at sea and offer support to the district officers of the Crown on land. He set down the specifications for an effective patrol schooner and these were met in the "LA CANADIENNE" in which he sailed from 1855 until 1861. He had specified that a schooner was needed that could outsail and intercept any of the fine American fishing craft then frequenting Gulf waters. In his report submitted after his first season's voyage in "LA CANADIENNE" he recorded his satisfaction with the vessel's speed and seaworthiness.

In 1858, after having established control over illegal fishing in Gulf waters by the Americans, Dr. Fortin paid an official visit to the French colony of St. Pierre and Miquelon. He had instructions to study and report on the French fishery and on the fish trade around St. Pierre and the adjacent coasts of Newfoundland. He was cordially received by the French and provided with all facilities. Great admiration was expressed by the seamen of St. Pierre for the schooner, "LA CANADIENNE" and its smartly turned out "equipage".

By 1859, Dr. Fortin had established a system of licenses for salmon fishing on all the coasts of Gaspesia and the Gulf. Resident fishery officers

were appointed for the various districts and were assured that they could count on the support of "LA CANADIENNE" and its crew in dealing with those who broke the law. Each year the local reports of these fisheries officers were incorporated in Dr. Fortin's annual report to the Government in addition to his detailed observations, recommendations and statistical tables for each division of the fisheries.

Above and beyond the discharge of his demanding duties as Magistrate and Overseer of the Fisheries, Dr. Fortin found the time to carry on marine research and to record a series of invaluable studies on the marine animals, fishes, mollusca and crustacea of the Lower River and Gulf of St. Lawrence. He described more than eighty species and his descriptions, bearing the stamp of direct and first-hand observation, have been preserved in his series of annual reports. From these studies one can, for example, gain information and an appreciation of the whale fishery that had been initiated and developed by the enterprising settlers and seamen of Gaspé Bay, and of his interesting attempt to establish oyster beds in Gaspesian waters. Such work won Dr. Fortin international recognition and led to his nomination to represent Canada at the Maritime Exhibition held at Le Havre, France.

In 1867 the citizens of Gaspé demonstrated their confidence and respect for Dr. Fortin by electing him to be their representative in Parliament. He served as the Member for Gaspé in the Canadian House of Commons from 1867 until 1874 and in the Quebec Legislative Assembly from 1867 until 1878. He was a member of the Executive Council and Commissioner of Crown Lands in the Ouimet administration and was chosen as Speaker of the Assembly in 1875. He was subsequently named to the Senate of Canada where he served with distinction until his death in June, 1888 at the age of sixty-five.

A founder of the Geographical Society of Quebec, Dr. Fortin served as its first President. He was responsible also for the creation of the Marine



Library of Quebec to which he made valuable donations of books and charts.

The remarkable career of Dr. Pierre Fortin is deserving of remembrance and honour in Gaspesia. In establishing firm control over the fisheries he contributed to the survival and development of that industry so vital to the Gaspesian economy. He provided consistent and effective support to the maintenance of law and order. His comprehensive reports brought the situation and problems of Gaspesia to Government attention. He was known personally to a large number of the Gaspesian citizens of his time. He went on to serve Gaspé with distinction in the provincial and federal parliaments. In all that he did and to the end of his days as a Canadian Senator, he had the best interests of the District of Gaspé and the Gulf Region at heart.