

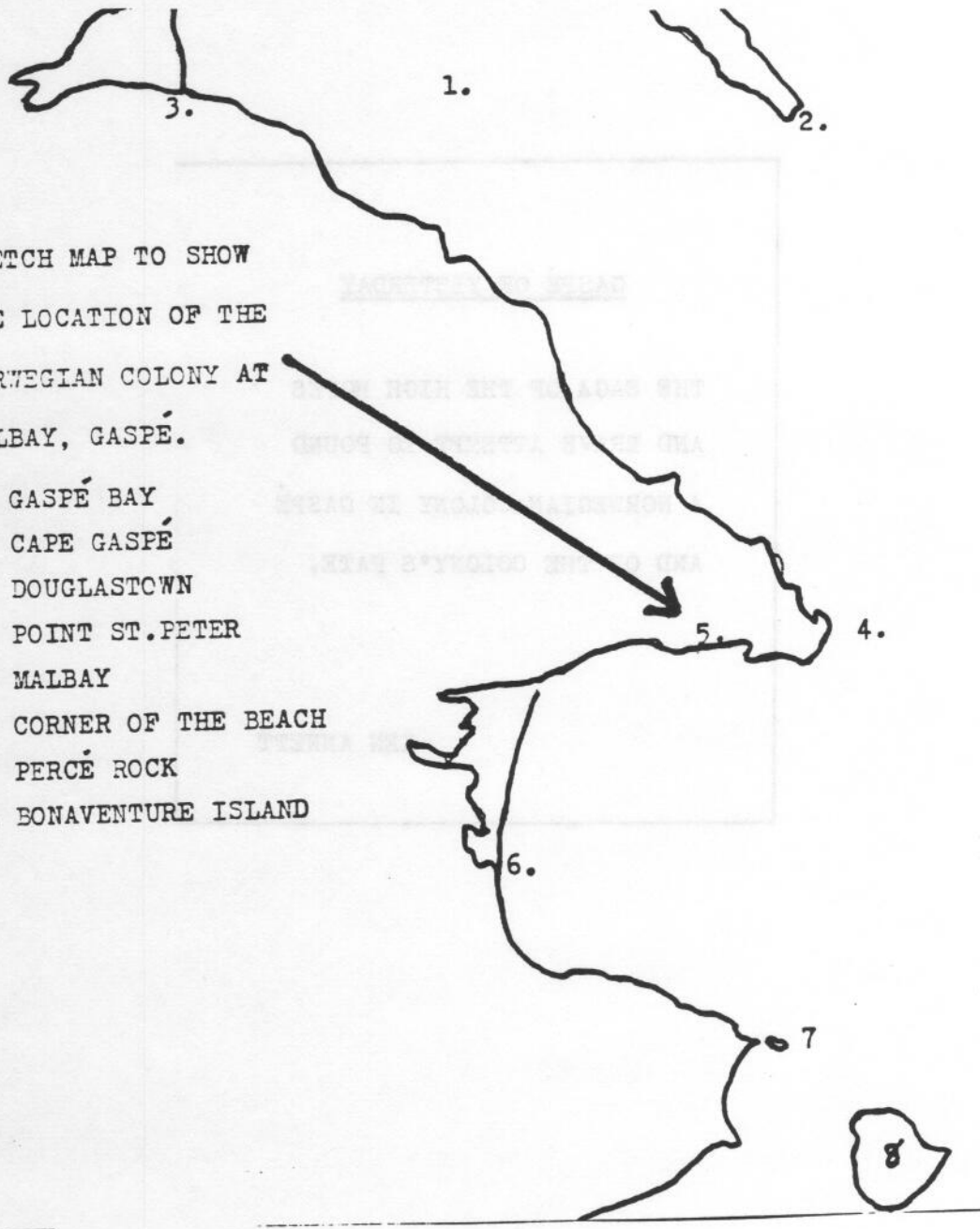
GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

THE SAGA OF THE HIGH HOPES
AND BRAVE ATTEMPT TO FOUND
A NORWEGIAN COLONY IN GASPÉ
AND OF THE COLONY'S FATE.

KEN ANNETT

SKETCH MAP TO SHOW
THE LOCATION OF THE
NORWEGIAN COLONY AT
MALBAY, GASPÉ.

1. GASPÉ BAY
2. CAPE GASPÉ
3. DOUGLASTOWN
4. POINT ST. PETER
5. MALBAY
6. CORNER OF THE BEACH
7. PERCÉ ROCK
8. BONAVENTURE ISLAND



ATTEMPT AT NORWEGIAN SETTLEMENT AT MALBAY, GASPÉ

While the landfall on Gaspé shores of sea-roving Vikings remains an intriguing speculation of the era of pre-history, the attempt of their Norse descendents of the 1860's to settle at Malbay, Gaspe, is a matter of definite record. Though Gaspesians of that time were familiar with the attempt to found this Norwegian settlement, the story has faded away with passing time. Though the project was short-lived and unsuccessful, the attempt of the Norwegians to become Gaspesians persists as a saga of such scope and interest as to justify this recall by GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY.

EARLY NORSE EMIGRATION TO AMERICA

In those early decades of the 19th century when the United States of America was the land of promise for waves of immigrants from European lands, many Norwegians left Scandinavia for various reasons, including religious intolerance, crossed the Atlantic to New York or Boston, and moved inland to settle such states as pioneer Wisconsin and Minnesota. The communities they settled on the vast frontier beyond the Great Lakes, reflected their Norse culture and influence and this influence still persists.

About 1850 a significant shift in the arrival port of Norwegian immigrants came about as the result of commercial developments. The repeal of British navigation laws and the dramatic rise of the seaport of Quebec as the export center for the vast timber resources of the St. Lawrence River System, drew more and more shipping from Norway to load timber for Europe. The era has been documented by the remarkable illustrations of the publication, "LE VIEUX SILLERY" by Andre Bernier, showing the vast timber rafts crowding the coves at Quebec and the veritable forest of masts of ships that were loading or awaiting their turn.

Ships inbound from Norwegian ports to the timber coves of Quebec on the St. Lawrence found it greatly to their profit to carry the emigrants from Norway that formerly booked passage to New York or Boston. In a ten year period from 1854 it is reported that more than 40,000 Norwegian immigrants landed at the port of Quebec.

CANADIAN GOVERNMENT REACTION

While, for a time, the Norwegian immigrants, landed at Quebec, moved on to the American Mid-West, the Canadian Government soon came to realize that it should take steps to interest Norwegians to settle in Quebec. Such alternative could reduce the toil, time and expense of travel to the Mid-West and provide badly needed settlers for Quebec's vast and thinly populated territory. As early as 1856 the Government moved to reserve land in Quebec for Norwegian settlers and to make regulations to promote and support their settlement.

An important step was taken in 1858 when the Government appointed the Norwegian born, Christopher Closter, as an immigration officer at Quebec. Closter, the brother of a prominent Quaker of Stavanger, Norway, had good qualifications, experience and connections for the task. In America for some eight years, he had moved from the United States to Hamilton, Upper Canada. In company with a fellow Norwegian, Closter had then established a Quebec company involved in the timber shipping trade. The suggestion that Gaspé be selected as the location of a Norwegian settlement is credited to Christopher Closter.

There was much to recommend Gaspesia as a site for Norwegian settlement. The settlers there would find a land that resembled their native Norway - a rugged, sea-washed coast indented by deep bays and with sheltered coves and barachois as havens for fishermen. The coastal lands, forested hills and the sea all offered great potential to reward the hard work of settlers. Even the

isolation of Gaspesia was relative in comparison with former destinations of immigrants in the American Mid-West. The district offered an abundance of Crown Land so that new settlers need displace no one. The Government was prepared to offer each settler the choice of 100 acres of land for the total amount of \$20.00 - payable over a period of 5 years. Roads to provide access to the Malbay lands were to be opened by the Gaspesian officials responsible.

NORWEGIAN SETTLERS IN GASPE

The Reports of the Canadian Minister of Agriculture reveal that in 1860 a start was made at the actual settlement at Malbay and that a major effort was undertaken to promote the Gaspé project and attract settlers. Mr. Helge Hangan, a Norwegian who had been settled for some time in the Township of Bury on the lands of the British-American Land Society, took back to Norway the literature on settlement in Quebec that had been prepared and translated into Norwegian by Christopher Closter. He visited various Norwegian centers to publicize the settlement opportunities in Gaspé. Bureaus were set up to provide information to prospective emigrants. The response was such that, prior to the arrival of Christopher Closter in Norway, Helge Hangan had made preliminary arrangements for ships to carry settlers to Gaspé.

Closter, before sailing for Norway, had gone to Gaspé in the summer of 1860 to help the first, pioneer group of Norwegians to settle. By the end of December, 1860, the Malbay colony counted some 50 settlers.

On his arrival in Norway early in 1861, Christopher Closter followed up on the recruitment begun by Helge Hangan. Revised literature now reflected some very favorable reports made by the first settlers in Gaspé. Some of the claims made were rather "rose-coloured" - such as the statement that 500,000 settlers could find a good new life in the Gaspé District. However, the whole idea of settlement in Gaspé was opposed vigorously by the Rev. G.F. Dietrichson of Stavanger - a strong advocate of the Wisconsin - Minnesota colony. Despite his

dire warnings of impending ruin for those emigrating to Gaspé, Closter signed up many prospective settlers. The group sailed from Norway on the ship, "IRIS" and reached Gaspé in late July of 1861. Closter's wife and children, his aged father and mother, a brother and other relatives were among the group. The population of the colony at its peak was approximately four hundred (400)

Reference to the Norwegian settlement is found in the reports of Mr. John Eden of Gaspé who was responsible for the opening of new roads. In 1860 and 1861 he reported that three roads had been built:

1. The first, called the lower road, which begins at Lot No. 37 in the first range north and extends as far as the second range.
 2. The second, known as the upper road, which begins at Lot No. 40 in the first range north and extends to the second range
 3. A road across a "savanne" from Lot. No. 38 North to Lot No. 18 South
- Mr. Eden added that in order to reach the Norwegian settlement in the second range it would be necessary to open another mile of road beyond each of the two new roads above (#1 and #2). He described the nature of the soil where the settlers had taken up residence as "excellent". It would be most useful, Mr. Eden added, if the new roads could be opened, in a straight line, as far as the Township of Douglass or Gaspé Basin.

For a time all seems to have gone well with the new settlers. In October, 1860, prior to the arrival of the main group from Norway, one of the Malbay settlers wrote to a relative at home:

"...I like Gaspé much better than any place I have been before and I don't doubt you would do as well here as there..."

Even after the arrival of the "IRIS" settlers there are references to the purchase and operation of a saw-mill and a flour-mill by Closter and his men.

THE TURN OF THE TIDE

The winter of 1861 proved to be a time of great difficulty for the Norwegian settlement. Food and other supplies having run short, Christopher Closter collected most of the cash reserves of the colonists and set off for Quebec to obtain the desperately needed supplies. Time passed by without the return of either Closter or the supplies. The people of Gaspé Bay took up a public subscription in an attempt to alleviate the distress of the Malbay settlers. Some accused Closter with having absconded and with having used their money entrusted to him to pay his private debts. His wife was reported to be, "sick with sorrow". However, other reports hold that Closter did reach Quebec and purchase supplies - but that delivery was never made because of winter shipping delays or loss from other reasons. Whatever the circumstances, the Norwegian settlers had a very unhappy experience. In March, 1861, one of their Quaker leaders wrote to Norway with a warning that no Norwegian emigrant should henceforth be advised to go to Gaspé. The project had, in effect, failed and its members, that had come to Gaspesia with high hopes, proceeded to disperse to other locations - principally in the United States. Christopher Closter, who had been so prominent in the Malbay settlement attempt was reported in 1864 as living with his family in Chicago.

POSTSCRIPT

The experience of the Gaspé settlement was widely discussed and long remembered in Norway. A deep suspicion persisted for decades to the effect that Norwegian emigrants should avoid Canada. The British-American Land Society felt such negative attitude in its efforts to recruit settlers in Norway. It was not until the Canadian Prairies opened to settlement that immigration to Canada from Norway resumed.

In searching for reasons as to why the attempt of Norwegian settlement at Malbay failed, a contemporary opinion is to be found in comments of Mr. John Eden of Gaspé as recorded in the Report of the Minister of Agriculture -1863. Mr. Eden wrote, in part: "...I was greatly disappointed by the latest arrivals of Norwegian immigrants...they do not want to work - are very dissatisfied at what is done for them - say openly that they were deceived by the government who promised to make them roads, etc.....EVIDENTLY SOME SECRET INFLUENCE MAKES THEM DISCONTENTED AND TENDS TO DIRECT THEM TO THE WEST...."

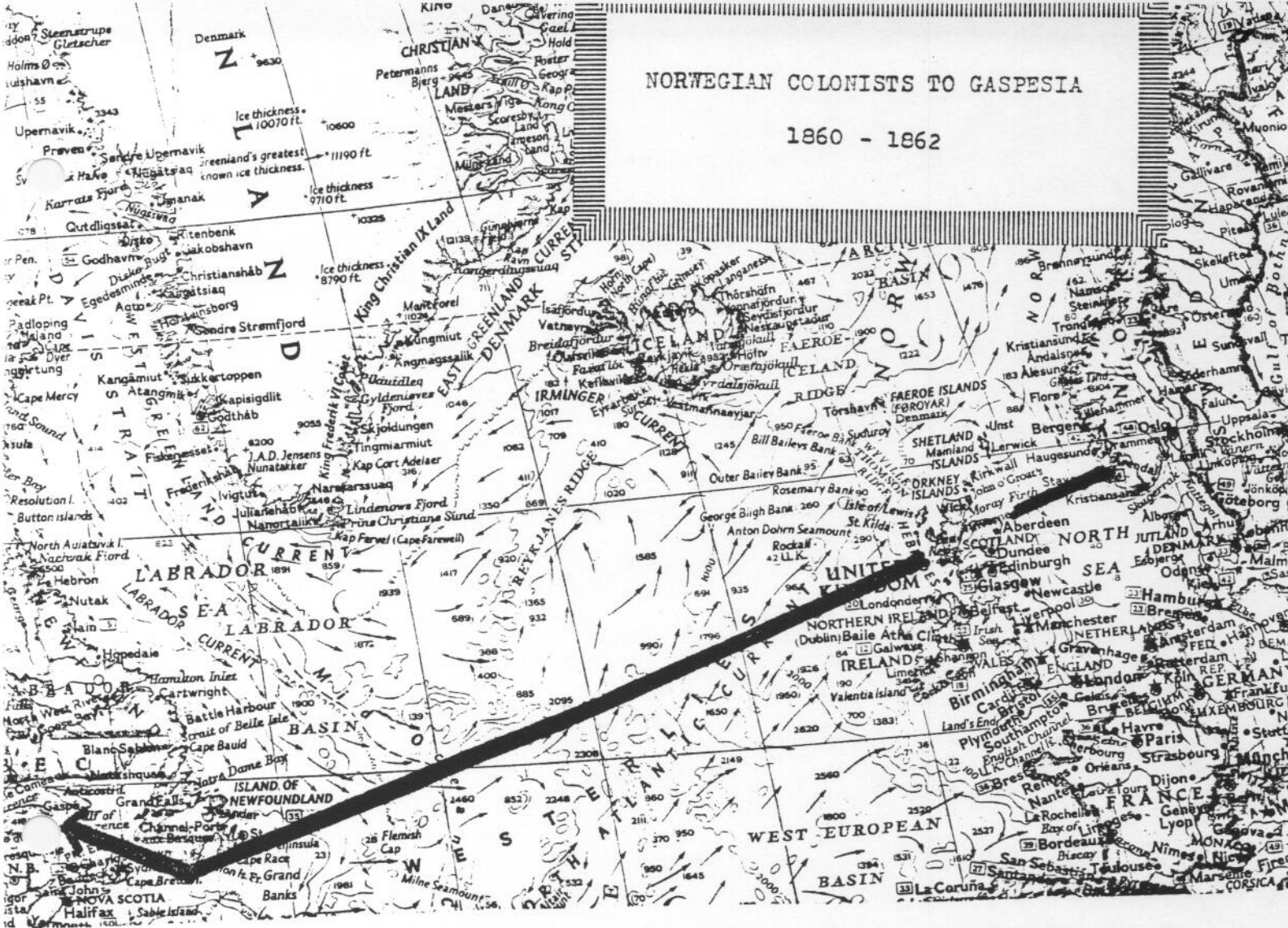
Mr. Eden's report attempted, further, to identify other reasons for the failure of the settlement. These included:

- . access roads not completed
- . no road from the colony to Gaspé Basin
- . language - many settlers don't speak English
- . lack of skill for fishing
- . lack of means to get established
- . no church or school

If the opinion and comments of John Eden seem harsh in the social context of today, it must be recognized that his judgment was that of a pioneer Gaspesian who had adapted successfully to the harsh realities of early Gaspesia. He may well have reflected general opinion. On the broader scale, the settlement's failure can be attributed to poor planning and management of its promoters, a lack of appreciation of the process of adaptation to Gaspesia and the less than complete support of the Government in the practical arrangements for successful settlement.

NORWEGIAN COLONISTS TO GASPESIA

1860 - 1862



A VIEW ACROSS MALBAY TO PERCÉ

