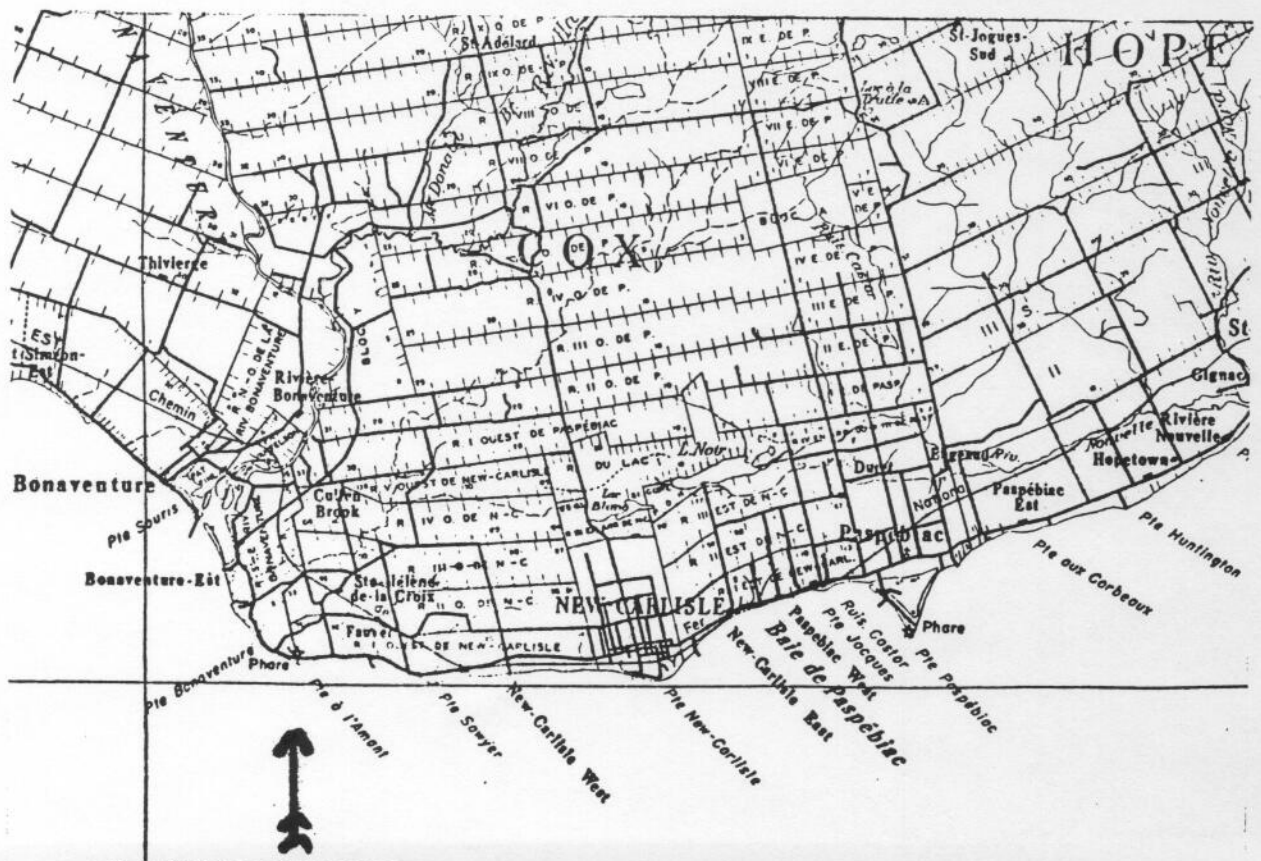


GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

THE PERILS OF POINTE DES ECHOURIS

Eastward of the harbour of Bonaventure, a point of the Gaspesian coastline projects seaward into Bay Chaleur. Known at various times as POINTE DES ECHOURIS, L'AMANT'S POINTE and POINTE BONAVENTURE, the location was the bane of mariners in the days of sail. Its treacherous off-shore reefs claimed many a ship-wreck, of which those recalled in this article of GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY were typical.

Ken Annett



THE PERILS OF POINTE DES ECHOURIS

That Pointe des Echouris was well and truly named with respect to its reputation for shipwreck in the days of sail is evident by reference to the definition of the French verb, ECHOUER:

TO RUN AGROUND

TO BE STRANDED

TO HIT A ROCK

TO BE WRECKED ON THE ROCKS

Pointe Bonaventure, as this projection of the coastline of Gaspesia is now known, with its treacherous off-shore reef, was the scene, all too often, of maritime disaster.

THE BARK "MEARNS" OF GLASGOW

It was late in the month of November, 1836, that the 587 ton Bark, "MEARNS" of Glasgow, finished loading a full cargo of timber, deals, staves and lathwood at Dalhousie in Chaleur Bay for delivery overseas at her home port. The Captain, William Mitchell, Master Mariner, his Chief Mate, Arthur Allan, Second Mate, James Taylor, Ship's Carpenter, Christopher Culthart and Seamen, William Scott and William Connors would testify later, under oath, that their vessel was, at time of sailing, seaworthy in every respect, and was well-equipped and manned for the Atlantic voyage.

The "MEARNS" sailed from Dalhousie on November 24th and at 5:00 P.M. of that day dropped her Pilot off Heron Island. The weather, which had been good at the time of sailing, began to deteriorate with evening and by 9:00 P.M. the Bay began to be obscured by snow flurries. At 10:30 P.M. the ship's officer on duty observed the shore of Bonaventure distant some two and a half miles. The Captain, relying on STEELE'S NEW CHART OF THE GULF AND RIVER ST. LAWRENCE, published by the BRITISH ADMIRALTY in April, 1833, had every reason to be confident that his ship had ample searoom and would have clear sailing out of Bay Chaleur.

To the great astonishment and consternation of Captain Mitchell and his crew the "MEARNS" struck with great violence about 11:00 P.M.

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showed, instead, a clear depth of 9 fathoms of water.

The crew set to work in the darkness and rising storm to get anchors out in an attempt to work their vessel off the rocks but all efforts proved to be of no avail.

By daylight of November 25th the wind had increased to gale force from the NNW with driving snow and a heavy onshore swell. The hull of the "MEARNS" strained and began to take in water - six feet of water was reported in her holds and rising. Fearing for their lives, the crew succeeded in launching the ship's boats and in reaching shore.

The following day, taking advantage of a lull in the storm, the crew returned to their stranded vessel in mid-morning. They found ten feet of water in the holds and all efforts to pump it out had little effect. With evening, the wind veered and began to blow again with great violence. At 6:00 P.M. the kedg anchor warp parted and the "MEARNS" fell across the seas which beat against her and made a clear breach over her. It was evident that no effort could now save her, so her crew again sought refuge ashore.

The official survey of the "MEARNS", which concluded that the vessel was a total wreck, was carried out by:

- . James McCracken, Merchant and Master Mariner of Bonaventure.
- . Pierre Poirier, Master Mariner, of Bonaventure.
- . James Sherar, Sr., Master Shipbuilder of New Carlisle.
- . Joseph Russell of Miramichi.

Their report of survey was witnessed by Harvey Adams and Felix Arbou.

OTHER POINTE DES ECHOURIS WRECKS.

The fate of the "MEARNS" was not unique in the record of maritime disaster at Pointe des Echouris in Bay Chaleur. Years previously, in 1827, the 141 ton Brig, "ALEXANDER" of Aberdeen, Scotland, James Carnegie, Master, had come to grief on the reef off that Point. Again, in 1841, the 53 ton schooner, "ALERT" of Pictou, Nova Scotia, James Grahan, Master, was wrecked there

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Nicholas Boissonault, Merchant and Shipbuilder of Bonaventure, David Le Boutiller, Merchant and Ship Owner of Paspébiac and Fabien Poirier, Master Mariner of Bonaventure reported that pieces of her hull were strewn along the beach as she was pounded to pieces off-shore. In 1850, the 35 ton schooner, "WATERLOO" of Halifax, George Glawson, Master, stranded and was wrecked off Pointe des Echouris in a fierce November storm. Her cargo of "melasses", tobacco, tea and cotton warp was so damaged "as not to be fit for reshipment". Many Bay Chaleur households must have been short of molasses, tobacco and tea in that winter of 1850 :

LIGHTHOUSES

The placing of lighthouses on the projecting points of the Bay Chaleur coastline did not come until late in the 19th century. According to information supplied by the Canadian Coastguard Service, the Paspébiac Point light dates from 1870, that on Carleton Point from 1872, and, incredibly, that on Pointe des Echouris or Bonaventure Point, only from 1909. In view of the shipwrecks associated with the latter, this 20th century date seems to be very late in time. It is hoped that any reader of SPEC who may have additional information on Pointe des Echouris, its maritime peril, shipwrecks and lighthouse will agree to share it with his fellow Gaspesians.