

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

LOUIS OLIVIER GAMACHE  
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1784-1854  
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"THE WIZARD OF ANTICOSTI"  
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KEN ANNETT

" THE WIZARD OF ANTICOSTI "

FOREWORD

In the era of the Gaspé schooners - of sail and wooden ships - busy at whaling and coastal trade, the island of Anticosti was better known to the mariners of Gaspesia than it is today for many of their descendents. For this major island, 140 miles long and with a coastline of some 300 miles lies across the mouth of the vital St.Lawrence sea route between the Gaspé Peninsula and the North Shore. From the time of its documented discovery by Jacques Cartier in 1534, Anticosti was a feared menace to shipping and the graveyard of countless ships inbound from Europe or outbound to the Atlantic from ports of the St.Lawrence.

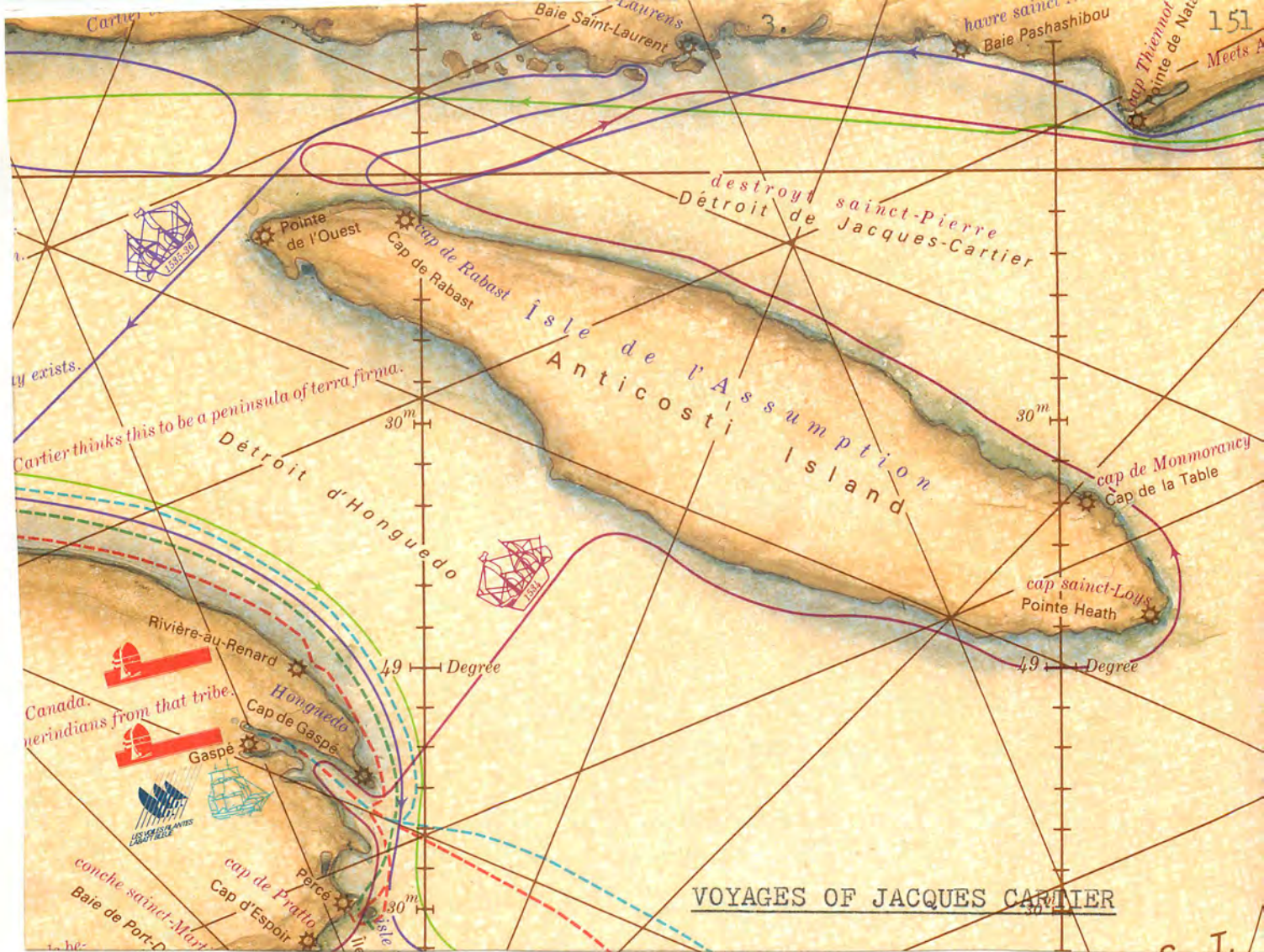
During the French Regime in New France Anticosti had been granted as fief to the Sieur Louis Jolliet for his remarkable accomplishments as explorer, mapmaker and trader. His post on the island was captured and destroyed in 1690 by the New England expedition of Sir William Phips. The sons and a daughter of Louis Jolliet reestablished fishing stations on Anticosti but for more than a century after their time settlement was abandoned.

Following the British Conquest William Grant, Peter Stuart and the Hon.Thomas Dunn, all of Quebec City, acquired lands on Anticosti. An attempt at settlement was headed up by the fur trader, Alexander Morrison, but it failed. As of 1808 only two settlers remained on the island, Joseph Beaudin and Jacques Duchesnau and when the Governor-General, Lord Aylmer, made his well-documented sea voyage to the Gulf and Gaspesia in 1831 (Ref. "GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY" #4 BONNYCASTLE VISITS GASPÉ.) he reported only two settlers on Anticosti. They were a M. A. Hamel who had married the Widow Jacques Duchesnau and Louis Olivier Gamache, the subject of this article, who had acquired the lands of the late Joseph Beaudin at Ellis (or Gamache) Bay near the West Point of the island.

FOREWORD-(ctd)

That Louis Olivier Gamache was one of the most unusual and intriguing men of his time is evident from the information on record about his personality and career. The Archives of the Province of Quebec has many notarial deeds relative to his business transactions. The Abbé J.B.A. Ferland, Historian, whose records of travel in the Gulf Region and Gaspesia have been reflected in GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY - PARTS I, II and III of "GASPESIAN TRAVELOGUE" visited Gamache on Anticosti Island and left us his vivid impressions. Another prolific historian, James MacPerson Le Moine, recalled Gamache when he visited Anticosti "...in the well-known Gaspé whaler - the BREEZE, of Captain Arbour..." He considered that the story of Gamache was worthy of a major volume. More recently the interesting volume of W.Donald MacKay, "ANTICOSTI:THE UNTAMED ISLAND", published by McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., in 1979, not only recalls the story of Gamache but includes interesting photos of the site of the Gamache homestead at Ellis Bay and of the Gamache gravestone with its inscription.

In presenting the following 19th century account by Mr. Lanman from an issue of the NEW YORK JOURNAL OF COMMERCE, as included in Le Moine's "CHRONICLES OF THE ST.LAWRENCE", the reader will be aware that it is a subjective, rather than a definitive, account of the life and times of a very complex but intriguing personality.



#### "THE WIZARD OF ANTICOSTI.

"Lonely and desolate are the shores of Anticosti. In winter they are blocked up with ice and whitened with snow,—and in summer almost continually enveloped in fogs. To all mariners who have occasion to sail the Gulf of St. Lawrence, they are a perpetual terror, and the many shipwrecks occurring there have given to the Island a mournful celebrity. Two lighthouses, lighted from March to December, and two provision depots are the only localities on the Island where those who may have escaped a watery grave can obtain succor from famine and cold, and the most noted of them is the Bay of Gamache. It is about five miles in circumference, the only really secure harbor in the region, and derives its name from the strange man who there first made himself a home. From Quebec to Gaspé,—from Gaspé to Pictou, not a name was better known, and the manifold stories picked up by the writer—during his Canadian and New Brunswick wanderings—respecting him would fill a volume. They were extravagant, made up of fact and fiction, representing him as a kind of ancient mariner, a pirate, a being half savage and half ogre, and enjoying the special protection of Satan himself. But the simple story of his actual life, well worth recording, is as follows:—

"Louis Olivier Gamache was born at Islet in Lower Canada in 1784. When a mere boy he left his home and obtained a sailor's berth on board an English frigate, in which capacity he

spent about twenty years of his life, roaming over the entire world. On his return, he found his parents dead and himself friendless and poor. Having strayed into the little port of Rimouski, he tried his hand at business and failed. Disgusted with people generally, and somewhat so with life, he resolved to settle on the Island of Anticosti, whose lonely shores had taken his fancy captive when last returning from his ocean wanderings. Determined as he was to spend the balance of his days in the peaceful enjoyments of hunting, fishing, and sailing, his sagacity led him to the bay already mentioned. He built himself a rude cabin and then visited the main shore to obtain a good wife, in which effort he was successful. She was all he hoped for, but the loneliness and cold of Anticosti were more than she could bear, and she died during her first spring upon the Island.\*

"Summer came and Gamache sought for peace of mind by sailing in his schooner among the icebergs of the north, and slaughtering the gray seal and walrus. With the money thus made he erected some new buildings, and gathered about his home a few of the comforts of an ordinary farm, such as horses, cows and sheep. He married a second wife, with whom he spent the seven happiest years of his life, but on returning from

\* "THE LAMENT OF THE PIRATE'S BRIDE.

" By the sad sea waves  
I listen while they moan  
A lament o'er graves  
Of hope and pleasure gone.  
I was young, I was fair,  
I had not a care  
From the rising of the moon  
To the setting of the sun ;  
Yet I pine like a slave  
By the sad sea wave.  
Come again !  
Bright days of hope  
And pleasures gone  
Come again !  
Bright days—come again !"

one of his winter hunts, he found her frozen \* to death with his two children so nearly famished that they followed their mother and he was once more alone. A kind of gloom now settled upon his spirit, and though he led an active life, he became misanthropic. He cared not to have any intercourse with his fellow-men, and his only companion and confidante was a half-breed Frenchman ; but if a revenue officer, a professional fisherman, or a party of sporting characters happened to make him a visit, they were sure to be treated with kindness. He felt that death had robbed him of all that he most cherished, and how did he know, was his mode of reasoning, but some of his Indian neighbors would prove treacherous, and take his life without warning? Some band of pirates, moreover, might hear of his forlorn condition and sweep away his property and murder him in cold blood. These were impending calamities, and something must be done for protection. Hence it was that he resolved to adopt a name of measures that would inspire a dread of his person and name. He fully succeeded in all his romantic efforts, and the following are a few of the many with which his name is associated.

"On one occasion, having been windbound for several days, he anchored his vessel in one of the ports of Gaspé, and making his way to the village inn ordered a sumptuous supper for two persons. The truth was he was nearly famished, and having caused his man Friday to be on board the vessel, he had determined to have a good feast and any fun that might follow. Before

sitting down to his repast he gave special directions to the effect that the door of the dining-room must be locked, and that it would be dangerous to have him disturbed. He devoured nearly everything on the table, and finally falling into a deep sleep did not wake till morning. The host and some of his inquisitive neighbors were moving about soon after daybreak, and a number of them declared that they had heard mysterious noises during the night, and when the unknown guest stepped out of the dining room into the sunshine, and while paying his bill with American gold, talked incoherently about the gentleman in black, the people who hung about the house were amazed, but when the landlord told them of the empty plates and platters, and they saw the stranger re-embark without saying a word, they were all confounded, and felt certain that the devil and an intimate friend had visited their town.

“On another occasion, while spending a day or two in Quebec, an officer of the law boarded the schooner of our hero, for the purpose of arresting him for debt. Gamache suspected what was in the wind, and as the autumn was far advanced, and he was prepared to leave for the Gulf, he told the officer that the captain should soon be on board, and suggested a glass of wine below by way of killing time. The wine was good, and the officer concluded that he would call again to see the Captain, as his business was of a private nature, but when he ascended to the deck he found himself a prisoner. He was compelled to visit the Island of Anticosti, where he spent the entire winter feasting on the fat of the land as well as of the sea. In the spring, with a good supply of wine and the money for his claim, he took passage in a fishing vessel, and returned a wiser and better man to Quebec, and to the bosom of his disconsolate family.

“Even the officers of the Hudson’s Bay Company were compelled to measure their skill with the wit of our friend Gamache. He would barter with the Indians on the Labrador coast, although he knew that the consequence of being captured might be serious. Business had been brisk with him, and when on a quiet summer afternoon he was about leaving a little harbor on the forbidden coast, he was discovered by an armed vessel which immediately started in pursuit. Night came and Gamache found refuge in the harbor of Mingan. When the morning light appeared his enemy was in the offing. Another chase ensued, long and tedious, and night again settled on the waters. And then it was that a rude craft was made and launched, covered with a few tar-barrels, and the bright flame which soon illumined the ocean directly in the course of the frigate, convinced its officers that the runaway had, conscience-stricken, gone to the bottom of the sea. But a better fate awaited him, for he spent the subsequent night in his own bed on the Bay of Gamache.

“On another occasion when our hero happened to be left entirely alone at his house, he saw a stalwart Indian disembark from his canoe, and with a bottle in his hand, march directly for the dwelling. The movements of the savage, his fondness for liquor, and his well-known character for fighting, portended trouble. As he approached, Gamache planted himself at the threshold of his castle, rifle in hand and exclaimed, ‘One step further, and I will fire!’ The step was taken, but it was the last, for a bullet shattered the thigh bone of the savage. Thus reduced to helplessness, he was gratified to find that Gamache carried him into the house, placed him on a bed, doctored his wound and took every care of him, until the damaged leg was restored; and then loading the Indian with provisions, escorted him to his canoe, with the parting benediction: ‘When next you hear that Gamache is alone, and attempt to give him trouble, he will send the bullet through your head,—and now begone!’ That lesson had its legitimate effect on the whole tribe of Anticosti Indians.

“ One more incident touching the Wizard of Anticosti is to this effect: A young pilot had been driven by the stress of the weather into the Bay of Gamache. He had heard much of the supposed freebooter, and nothing but the dreadful state of things would have induced him to seek refuge in that particular Bay. A short time after he dropped anchor, Gamache came out in a small boat and asked the pilot to his house. Most reluctantly was the invitation accepted, but a manifestation of courage was deemed necessary. When the guest entered the dwelling and saw the walls of each room completely covered with guns, pistols, hatchets, cutlasses, and harpoons, his fears were excited to the highest pitch. Gamache observed this, but only enjoyed the stranger's consternation. A smoking supper was spread upon the table, but even the moofe and the beaver's tail were only tasted by one of the party—the eye of the other quivered, with excitement, and his thoughts were bent upon the tale that would circulate respecting his fate. He made a display of gayety; when the evening was waxing on, he rose to depart, and with many expressions of thankfulness he offered his hand to his host. ‘No, no, my friend,’ said Gamache, ‘you must not leave here; the sea is rough, and the night is dark and wet, and you cannot leave the bay. I have a comfortable bed upstairs, and to-morrow you may leave if still alive.’ These words sounded like a knell, and up to the chamber of death, as he supposed, ascended the pilot. ‘You may sleep,’ continued Gamache, as he handed his guest a lamp, ‘as long and soundly as you can. Your bed is soft; it is made with the down of birds I myself have killed; for I am a good shot, and I never miss my game.’ For a while the pilot had found it impossible to quiet his never certain sleep; but nature finally gave way,

and he fell into a doze which was anything but refreshing. As the clock struck twelve he was startled by a noise, and opened his eyes. There stood Gamache by the bedside with a candle in one hand and a gun in the other. ‘I see you are awaked,’ said he, ‘but why so very pale? You have heard, undoubtedly, that I am in the habit of murdering every one who arrives at my house, and—hanging the gun on the two wooden pegs—‘I have come to give you a settler for the night!’ With this remark he displayed a bottle of brandy and tumbler, and after drinking the health of the pilot, handed him the glass, and continued—‘There, take a good pull; it will make you sleep soundly, and if Gamache comes to attack you during the night, you can defend yourself with the loaded gun hanging over your head,’ and thus the joke ended. When morning came, the storm had disappeared; and the pilot and his host were quite as happy as the day was bright.

“ And thus was it as the mood came upon him, that Gamache endeavored to relieve the monotony of his self-inflicted exile. His afflictions seemed to have changed his character; though certainly without guile, a kind of passion for doing out-of-the-way things followed him to the close of his life, and gave him the unenviable reputation he possessed. He died in 1854 from the effects of exposure to cold, and the pleasant Bay with his name is about the only memorial he left behind.

“ And now for a few authentic particulars respecting the general character of the Island of Anticosti, as developed by recent explorations. It is one hundred and thirty-six miles long, and thirty-six miles wide; a large part of the coast has a belt of limestone reefs that are dry at low water; the south side of the Island is generally low, but on the northern coast there are hills and cliffs that attain an elevation of three, four and five hundred feet. The only attempts at cultivation that have been made are at Gamache Bay, South-West Point and Heath Point, and the chief agricultural productions are potatoes, barley and peas; the forest land is abundant, but the trees are com-

monly small, and even dwarfish, and peat or mossy bogs abound in every direction. Fruit-bearing trees and shrubs are quite plentiful, but one of the most valuable natural productions is a wild pea growing along the shore of the ocean. The two principal rivers are the Salmon and the Jupiter, and all the streams as well as the lakes, which are numerous, are said to swarm with salmon, salmon trout and trout; the wild animals are the bear, the black, red and silver fox, and the marten. In the bogs and more sheltered parts of the coast, seals are extremely abundant. Besides the harbor named after Gamache, but originally called Ellis Bay, there is a Harbor called Fox Bay, but neither of them would shelter vessels of more than five hundred tons burden. The Island is under the Jurisdiction of Lower Canada, but is the private property of a family residing at Quebec."

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