

EARLY HISTORY OF GASPE

Gaspe was always, under the French regime, a well frequented fishing center and a connecting link between Canada and France. It is quite natural that it should have been the first to suffer from foreign invasions, without ever getting any favors or privileges or even the attention it deserved.

The first incursion was that of the Kirkes at Gaspé, in 1629. In 1650, a frigate chartered by the Quebec Jesuits, was captured by the Huguenots at Gaspé. "Our frigate, we read in the "Journal of the Jesuits" having stopped at Gaspé, was attacked by a boat belonging to Madam Daunay, a Huguenot, who resided in Acadia, and it fell into the hands of the pirates. A few men managed to escape and carried the news to Quebec." "On June the 29th, 1650, according to Father Menar of Trois-Rivières, a boat came from Gaspé and brought us the first letters from France and also the news of the capture of our frigate at Gaspé."

A detachment of men from the fleet commanded by Phipps ravaged Percé in 1690, committing the most abominable outrages, but they did not go as far as Gaspé.

In 1695, a boat belonging to Mons. Riverin, was captured there by the English. Gaspé was, however, to witness the arrival of the first really organized fleet when Walker sailed into the bay.

The 11th of April 1711, Rear Admiral Sir Hovenden Walker, commander of the 'White Squadron', was instructed by Queen Anne to attack Quebec, with the assistance of Hon. John Hill, Brigadier General.

He arrived at Boston on June the 15th with 12,000 men, and at once directed his course towards Quebec with 77 ships.

On their way they made prisoner a sea captain called Paradis. Walker who had no pilot, asked Paradis to lead his fleet, promising him 500 "pistols" (a coin of that period) and the reimbursement of all his losses. Paradis warned him that not a single ship would be saved if he spent the winter on the St. Lawrence. Walker claims, however, in his memoirs, that Paradis consented to lead him.

Walker intended to spend the winter at Quebec where he proposed to drag his ships ashore for fear they might be smashed by the heavy ice.

During the night of August the 18th Walker entered the bay of Gaspé to assemble his fleet. There he captured a small French vessel that was loading a cargo of fish. On the 20th order was given to burn the settlement in the Basin, to destroy the boats seize all available fish and take all the residents prisoners. ~~Therefore~~ there must have been "settlements" at Gaspé in those early days. It is not known what actual damages were caused by Walker's men.

On the 21st, a fresh breeze drove the fleet out of the Basin. The wind fell and a heavy fog covered and blanketed the waters. By night a storm arose and the fog thickened, and in spite of every possible effort the fleet was driven upon the north shore.

The "Edgar" under Walker's personal command, was saved thanks to Paradis' knowledge of the St. Lawrence and its currents. Finding himself surrounded by breakers, Walker ordered all sails set in an attempt to keep out of the dangerous position that threatened them. No time was lost in raising the anchors, the cables were cut.

About 7 o'clock on the morning of the 23rd, Walker learned that eight of his ships had been wrecked upon a little island (Isle aux Oeufs) with a loss of 884 lives.

The news of the disaster that saved Quebec from being captured did not reach Governor de Vaudreuil until October the 10th 1711. It was brought to him by Mons. de la Valtrie who had seen the wreckage of the English fleet on his way from Labrador. As a token of gratitude, the name of the church of "Notre-Dame-de-la Victoire" in Quebec, was changed to that of "Notre- Dame-des-Victoires".

On August the 26th Walker re-entered the basin of Gaspé and took refuge on Sandy Beach. On September the 8th, a council of war decided to send the English ships and men back to England, and the New England vessels and crews to Boston, passing by Cape Breton where some destruction might be carried out so that it could not be said that such an expedition had been abandoned without at least ~~causing~~ some damage to the enemy.

It was the Seven Years' War that put Gaspé in the limelight. France realized its importance as a great military sea port, but it was too late, her voluntary neglect was to be a most costly one. The English seized Gaspé, burnt everything it contained and later used it as a "springboard" when they made their great dash which was to result in the capture of Quebec. Let us now consider the condition of Gaspé at the time of the war how the French attempted, but too late to fortify and hold it; and how it was finally captured and destroyed by the English fleet.

In the Canadian Archives at Ottawa is an undated document that was written about the time of the Seven Years' War and in which the great strategic importance of the port of Gaspé is set forth with many strong arguments favoring its fortification. The document reads in part as follows:

"If the English managed to establish themselves at that point it is clear they could intercept all communications between Canada

and our continent (France) and between Quebec and Ile Royale; they would control Acadia and Nova Scotia and would ultimately get possession of the entire country between the River St. Lawrence and the French Bay. Masters of that bay they would dominate the Gulf St. Lawrence, they would naturally draw the entire Canadian trade in times of peace, and in time of war they would destroy it, and this would result in the destruction of New France"

The same document points out that the port of Gaspé could be used by the King's ships all year round.

"They would be well protected against storms and enemies without having to run the risk of waters that are very difficult to navigate owing to the presence of strong currents, shoals and breakers, and the location could be used as a storage for commercial purposes or for supplies required by the colony.

"This would also allow and even oblige the Canadians to manage their own exports, would give them excellent opportunity to use their own timber for the construction of necessary buildings, would gradually tend to the development of industry inspire a liking for commerce and agriculture, and would considerably develop trade and industry.

" Such an establishment would be of tremendous value in time of war."

It appears that about 1743 a new effort was made to draw the attention of the French authorities to the importance of the port of Gaspé. Those new warnings were not heeded and the English had but little difficulty capturing it.

In 1745, the English attempted a landing at Gaspé. They were beaten back by Jean Barré, a trader, assisted by some of his workers, but on their way they had captured a French ship.

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That attack once more stirred the powers that were in France but nothing was accomplished. Political corrupt influences and dark intrigues prevented the carrying out of all plans conceived or suggested for the defense of the port of Gaspé.

Upon the outbreak of the Seven Years' war there were at Gaspé, in addition to the one hundred and twenty men Mons. de Vaudreuil had sent there and those enlisted by Pierre Revol, a local trader, and more than three hundred residents. There were as many boats. The residences were scattered over Grande Grave, Penouille Point, the Basin, and around the mill four miles further. There were also some on the hospital side. Most of the boats had their moorings at Anse-aux-Cousins.

→ On October the 31st 1754, the Govern^{or} of the colony had addressed a most pressing appeal to the Minister of Colonies in which he stressed the importance of fortifying Gaspé against the possible and likely attack by the English. He pointed out that if Gaspé were properly protected the people there would greatly extend their commercial and agricultural activities. He set forth a plan by which the construction of the necessary fortifications could be carried out without any cost to the Crown. He stated that under proper conditions it would be possible to attract many Acadians who would be glad to get away from English rule.

His appeal was supported by a petition signed by Revol and Arnoux, the two leading business men of Gaspé, and they stressed the necessity of erecting proper fortifications at Gaspé.

But it was all in vain. Gaspé was left undefended and an easy prey to the enemy when he decided to take possession of it.

On April the 12th, 1756, Intendant Bigot notified the French Minister of Colonies that he was informed by a number of prisoners taken some time before, that the English intended to capture Gaspé,

De Vaudreuil was to supply some arms and ammunition for a kind of civil guard or militia which was to be formed for the defence of Gaspé. He also advised that two twenty-inch cables be strung just below high tide level at the narrow entrance to the basin.

On October the 2nd ~~for~~^{of} the same year, four merchant ships chartered for Canada and carrying recruits were captured by the English who were cruising outside the port of Gaspé.

On November the 1st, the English attempted to make a landing at Gaspé but they were repulsed with some loss.

Similar events of a somewhat minor nature but of some significance occurred again and again during the year 1757.

It was only after Wolfe had landed at Gaspé and had used it as a distant base for his operations against Quebec, which were to result in the capture of that city and the ultimate conquest of Canada, that it finally dawned upon a somnolent Government in France, that Gaspé was the actual master-key to Canada. They then realized, but much too late, that they had blundered by leaving it unprotected.

The French decided to attempt to recapture Gaspé after Wolfe had seized it. They then realized its strategic importance "Gaspé is the key to Canada, wrote Bougainville, it is of the greatest importance that we hold it if we wish to keep the St. Lawrence for France and maintain a free entrance to that river!"

The Gaspé harbour is an excellent one. The largest ships can easily anchor in perfect security at Penouille where they could spend the winter. They would be caught in the ice but the ships would not be injured. They could be overhauled in the spring, and the place is better for such work than the port of Rochelle itself.

"Moreover, two trips could be made between Gaspé and Europe every year and this would considerably aid the colony's commerce and trade.

" In peace time the King's ships would not be obliged to go as far as Quebec and this would also save time and avoid many navigation hazards. Goods would be unloaded at Gaspé and carried on lighters to Quebec.