

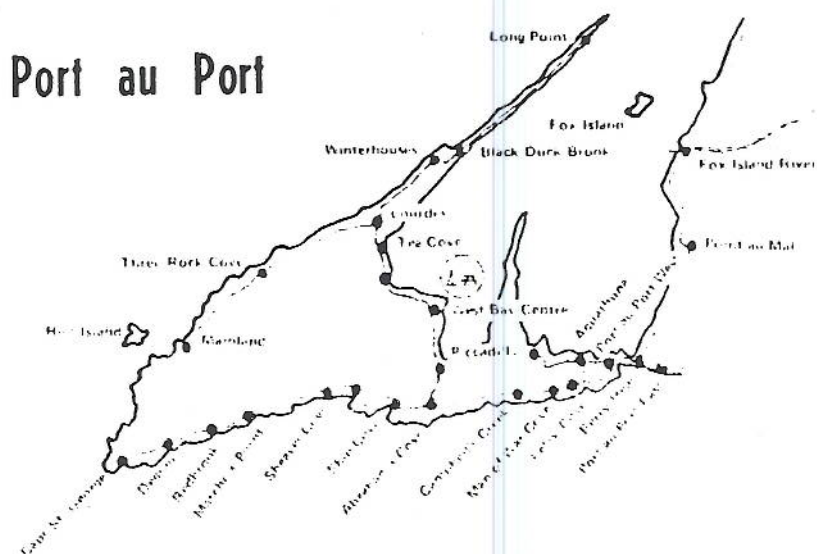
History of Port Au Port



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"Uncertainty of result hung over my determination, now more settled by opposition, to perform at all hazards what I had set out upon."

The above quoted words were uttered by W.E. Cormack in 1822 when he began his journey across Newfoundland with his Indian guide. The writer re-echoed these words as she tried to launch deeply into research which would reveal the history of Port au Port on the West Coast of Newfoundland. It has been an interesting project; and every hope is entertained that it will at least give a brief survey of the history of Port au Port and perhaps help to perpetuate the bravery, hardihood, and patriotism of its earliest settlers.



Chapter 1

GEOGRAPHIC POSITION

"Port au Port, as defined in an early edition of Nelson's Geography of Newfoundland, is a fishing station on the French shore, thirty miles distant from the entrance to St. George's Bay." It is divided into two parts - Port au Port East and Port au Port West - one on each side of the isthmus. The isthmus consists of two narrow beaches of coarse gravel with a salt water pond in between. The beaches are less than half mile apart and that is all that divides Port au Port from St. George's Bay and prevents the Port au Port Peninsula from being an island. An old French man from the Peninsula while trying to tell how close Port au Port East was to Port au Port West described it this way: "On a fine day me, I can see the sheets of bed on the line across the beach."

The shape of the Peninsula is rather peculiar. It has two long points jutting northward off its northern side. One of these, Long Point, is less than half a mile wide at times. The other, Shoal Point, has been widely dismissed because of the presence of oil there.

The geography of the Port au Port Peninsula has been of great interest since 1873. A Geological Survey of the area was carried out in that year.

The general structure of the bedrock in the area runs in a north-east, south-west direction. Most of the hills, valleys and bays are thus aligned in this direction. The rocks are mostly limestone and sandstone even though some shale does exist. Most of the shale is covered by a deep glacial or fluvial - glacial material.¹

The hills on the Peninsula are fairly high and descend into wide valleys or lands sloping gently to the sea. The shoreline is mostly surrounded by high cliffs.²

The Geological Survey carried out in the area in 1873 seems to explain why this region was held to be so valuable to the rest of Newfoundland

The East and West Bays of Port au Port are separated by a long low peninsula called Shoal Point ... The shore of the East Bay between the neck of the Peninsula and the Gravels is indented with a succession of coves, each of which affords remarkable example of those interesting dislocations by which the excarboniferous rocks have been let down among strata of Lower Silurian

¹Newfoundland Settlement Survey, Piccadilly, Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, 1954, P. 4

²Ibid. P. 4

age; and which are perhaps worthy of special notice, in an economic point of view from the circumstances of their containing deposits of metallic ores, which may prove of great value.

On the shores of St. George's Bay, about a mile and a half from the eastern outer point of the Gravels, a fault was observed where some red or brownish sandstone of the lower carboniferous formation are brought into abrupt contact with a set of hard whitish, mottled with red limestone, supposed to be of Potastam age. Bearing on a course N. 85° W., this fault runs obliquely across the pond at the Gravels, entering on the west side in a depression between exposures of limestone beds, which contain many fossils distinctly typical of Calciforous age. The effect on this dislocation is then seen at the head of the successive coves westward of Shag Point, where the carboniferous limestone, with red marls, sandstone and shale are let down in confused and broken strata, among the beds of Lower Silurian, which latter holds the outer coast line, dipping with a regular and gentle slope northerly towards the Bay. From the Cove known as Lead Cove, about half a mile west of Shag Point, the fault bears a little southward of west, its effects being similarly shown at each of the succeeding indentations, and finally coming out on the coast at the bend of the Bay, on the east side of Shoal Point Peninsula, where the newer formation is exposed at intervals, striking along the shore.³

The receipt of this report made the Government of Newfoundland realize the value of this area.

The physical features of the Peninsula which are described at the beginning of this chapter would have been drastically changed if man had been able to control nature and carry out his desires. The general consensus of opinion in the 1870's was that it would be valuable and economical to sever the Peninsula from the rest of Newfoundland. The above mentioned Geological Survey described the idea as very beneficial.

"...Were the country settled and mining operations going on, it appears to me that a canal might be cut through the Gravels of Port au Port with immense advantage. The two bays are there only divided by a beach not much over a quarter of a mile across altogether; the greater part of which is occupied by a salt water pond, which rises and falls with the tide. A breakwater built out from the western point on the St. George's Bay side, would secure that part from the violence of south-west or southerly gales; to render it safe as an anchorage, and from the wash of

³House of Assembly Journal, 1874, Page 675

the sea. By such a construction ingress and egress would be easily affected at all times, thereby often avoiding the long and tedious voyage around Cape St. George."⁴

Also a break here would cut off a hundred mile journey which was often treacherous. Thus freight and fishing boats would be able to travel more safely and cheaply around the Peninsula.

In the same report it was stated that this already had been tried but had failed. It is said that some of the older inhabitants remember the existence of an opening through the southern beach from St. George's Bay.

"At the investigation of the Very Rev. Thomas Sears, V.A., an attempt was made by some of the residents at the Gravels to effect an opening between Port au Port Bay and the pond, through the northern beach; but, owing to want of funds or lack of energy or encouragement, it was finally abandoned. It is said that some of the older inhabitants remember the existence of an opening through the southern beach from St. George's Bay, sufficiently large to admit the entrance of large sized fishing skiffs into the pond, but which was finally closed up by the wreck of a small vessel in the gut while endeavouring to reach the harbour during a storm."⁵

Both beaches still remain as they did at this time.

⁴. Ibid. P. 674

⁵. House of Assembly Journals, 1875, P. 703

CHAPTER II

CLIMATE

The climate of the area also gives it advantages over most of Newfoundland for making advances in agriculture and in being used as a tourist area. It has perhaps the most favourable climate of the whole island. The summers are warmer and have less fog than the rest of the island. It also has a moderate rainfall. The winters are a little colder than in most regions but clear sunny days are more common.

During some winters the Gulf ice blocks the Bays for a short time but usually they are free for navigation the whole year round.⁶

Comparing the temperatures in this area with those in the rest of the Island, we can see the advantages held by the west coast. The charts which follow give some comparisons.

<u>Month</u>	<u>Area</u>	<u>Temperature of Surface Water</u>
July	Port au Port Peninsula	60 F
July	Placentia Bay	55 F
July	Average for all the Island	48 F

<u>Month</u>	<u>Area</u>	<u>Temperature of Air</u>
January	Port au Port Peninsula	20 F
January	St. John's	24 F
January	St. Anthony	14 F
January	Burin	25 F

The central regions do experience a little warmer temperatures in the summer but they are not shown here. These tables substantiate what has already been stated.⁷

⁶Newfoundland Settlement Survey, Piccadilly, Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, 1954, P. 4

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The growing season is also suitable for most products. There is a temperature of over 43 degrees F. for about 155 days a year. This is longer than that experienced by most areas on the Island, except the area of the Humber Valley. The precipitation, although not as high as in other areas, is quite adequate for farming development.⁸

These characteristics give ample scope and promise for farming to be carried out in conjunction with, and as a supplement to the fisheries. All the common vegetables such as potatoes, cabbage, beet, turnip and carrot can be grown successfully with such suitable temperatures and soil.

⁸ Ibid., P. 8

CHAPTER III

EARLY HISTORY

The Port au Port Peninsula is situated on what has always been referred to as the French Shore. As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, the French started to settle in the Bay St. George and Port au Port Peninsula areas. Even as late as 1899 we can get a pretty good idea of how "French" this whole area was. Consider the following remarks from the Catholic School Report of 1899 under "District of Stephenville." The report reads: "There were two school in operation in this district during the year, the principal one being at Stephenville village, taught by Mr. John Guy, first grade salary \$246. This settlement is, I may say, totally inhabited by French. Owing to the French language being spoken here, very little English used, the teacher has much uphill work in teaching them the difficult subjects out of English books. "Black Duck Brook could not be visited that year but the inspector referred to it as "a remote settlement in Port au Port Bay, peopled principally by French fishermen."

The fishing rights on the French Shore had been officially settled by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1756. This treaty between Britain and France was modified many times in years to come. The position of both is definitely stated in the Treaty of Versailles, 1763, and again reaffirmed in the Treaty of Paris, 1814.

"...the fishery assigned to the subjects of his most Christian Majesty, beginning at the said Cape St. John, passing to the north, and descending by the west coast of the island of Newfoundland, shall extend to the place called Cape Ray... The French fishermen shall enjoy the fishing which is assigned to them by the present article, and as they had the right to enjoy that which was assigned to them by the Treaty of Utrecht." ⁹

These conditions were expanded on again in the Declaration of His Britannic Majesty given at Versailles on September 3, 1763.

"...in order that the fishermen of the two nations may not give cause for daily quarrels His Britannic Majesty will take the most positive measure for preventing his subjects from interrupting in any manner by their competition, the fishery of the French... but he will for this purpose, cause the fixed settlement which shall be founded there to be removed. His Britannic Majesty will give orders that the French fishermen be not incommoded in cutting the wood necessary for the repair of their scaffolds, huts and fishing vessels.

⁹The French Treaty Rights in Newfoundland, The Case for the Colony, London, June, 1980, P. 95

The 13th. article of the Treaty of Utrecht, and the method of carrying on the fishery, which has at all times been acknowledged, shall be the plan upon which the fishery shall be carried on there. It shall not be deviated from by either party, the French fishermen building only their scaffolds, confining themselves to the repair of their fishing vessels, and not wintering there; the subjects of His Britannic Majesty on their part, not molesting in any manner the French fishermen during their fishing, nor injuring their scaffolds during their absence."¹⁰

Because of these laws we see the settlement and fishing on the West Coast of Newfoundland restricted. In 1904 France traded her rights on the West Coast of Newfoundland for a small strip of land in Africa. For some time the French fishery in the area had been declining.

It may be interesting to note at this time that there was quite an ecclesiastical connection between the West Coast and Placentia in the early days. At least from the English occupation on, all the West Coast was part of Placentia parish. It's a matter of history that in 1820 the parish priest of Placentia made a trip all across Newfoundland to visit this part of his parish - mind you five hundred miles away. The next record of the parish priest visiting the West Coast was 1848, accompanied by Bishop Mullock as far as New Ferrole. There were 2000 Catholics on the coast at the time and they began to think of stationing a priest here.¹¹

On the seventh of September 1850, Reverend Alexis Bélanger, a priest formerly of Quebec and also of Charlottetown, P.E.I., arrived at Sandy Point from Labrador. It is said that on the very day after his arrival at this place he baptized a child and with this, the first entry, we find the following: "Nous, Prêtre missinaire le la Baie St. George". The first marriage registered is dated September 20, 1850.¹²

Father Bélanger while making Sandy Point his headquarters, visited Codroy and Bay of Islands from time to time. It is astonishing the work that the missionary had to do, as the parish register, which he left, amply testifies. So many baptisms, so many marriages to bless, so many to be instructed who wished to become united to the Church - these, combined with the poor accommodations, so exhausted his strength and impaired his health that the first resident priest died at Sandy Point September 7, 1868. The remains were brought to Quebec where they were interred on the 28 of September, 1868 at St. Roch des Aulmoies. Among those present at the funeral were the following men from Sandy Point; Constant Garnier, Federic Halbot, Hector McDonald and John Cashin.

¹⁰ Ibid., P. 96

¹¹ Interview with Rev. R.J. Greene, Port au Port West

¹² Pioneer History of St. George's Diocese - Newfoundland, Brosnan, Rev. Michael, B.A., P.P.

Father Bélanger was of course French speaking. His records are in that tongue and it is interesting to note that occasionally he brought in a Gaelic speaking priest for the Gaels of Codroy.¹³

It is not within the ambit of this brief history of Port au Port to expatiate upon the history of the Church from its beginnings but those who desire such an exposition may turn to the pages of the volume by Brosnan, Reverend Michael. However, as part of the ancient history it is interesting to note the ecclesiastical connection with Placentia.

¹³Report of the Missions, Prefecture Apoltolic, Western Newfoundland, Sears, Monsignor Thomas, 1877.

CHAPTER IV

POPULATION DEVELOPMENT

The people in the Port au Port area came from many different backgrounds, at first by the Treaty of Versailles settlement was discouraged along the French shore. This did not stop settlement, however. The West Coast was sparsely populated up to 1874 (when this paper begins). Since my paper is dealing mainly with Port au Port East and West we shall see statistics noting the development of these two communities from 1874 - 1966. There were many attractions for settlers - lead ore mines which were just opening, the fishing in the Bays surrounding the area and the good fertile soil. Consequently, the population grew.

The list of where these people were born is of some interest. It can be noted from different census reports that a substantial number had come from other British Colonies. The West Coast is much nearer to Nova Scotia than it is to the rest of Newfoundland so it is reasonable to accept the fact that many people came to this area from the Maritimes.¹⁴

An official census taken in Newfoundland in 1874 shows Berry Head with a population of 15 - nine males and six females. Eight of these were born in Newfoundland and seven in the British Colonies. Among these there were three families and one widow. The entire population was Roman Catholic. Two of these children could read and write and there were three children not attending school.

The same census showed The Gravels with a total population of 46. There were 28 males and 18 females. 43 of the total population were born in Newfoundland and three in the British Colonies. Included in these figures there were 7 families. 34 of the total population were Roman Catholic and 12 were Church of England. Six could read and write and there were children not attending school.

By this time, Lead Cove mine had been in operation for a year. In 1873, Captain De Brissoney, a Frenchman, complained of the mine. He said it was an infringement in the rights of the French. Nothing was done about this at the time.

The work at the mine was headed by a Captain Harvey from the East Coast of Newfoundland. It began in 1873 and carried on for five or six years. The mine employed only eight or nine men.¹⁵

Another complaint was received by the English Fisheries Officer in 1874. This time the complaint came from Captain Aubrey of the French Man-of-War Kersaint. The English officer refused to order the mine closed for two reasons.

¹⁴Rev. M. Brosnan, Pioneer History of St. George's Diocese, Mission Press, Toronto, P. 13

¹⁵Interview with Mr. Daniel McIsaac, Port au Port East

"Because in the first place, the manner is under consideration of the Home Government, and, -

Because it appears to me (after carefully reading the treaties and other documents supplied to me), that the French have no territorial rights in Newfoundland, "except so much of the beach as is necessary for the erection of stages and huts for drying fish", and it is not pretended that Mr. Bennett's works do or can ever prevent this. The French seem to have a right to demand the removal of any fixed fishing establishment, but this does not come under this head; and as the object of all the treaties and conventions has been simply to ensure to the French certain fishing rights, and has never contemplated any other industry within the limits specified, the absolute possession of Newfoundland by Great Britain being in every cause assured. I cannot conceive that it would enter into anyone's mind to sign away all access to the coast and harbors, as well as, virtually, nearly all the mineral wealth in the country, and to cripple all industries throughout about half of it."¹⁶

He is also quite indignant about such a complaint since this section is not close to the French fishing grounds. The mine does not take up much of the front shore in the Cove, and therefore does not take up fishing rooms.

While there he gives us a very good description of the settlement and from his comments we can see that the settlement is very small.

"The buildings are on the cliff about one hundred yards from its edge, and consist of the manager's house, a barrack for the men, and a forge and a small store-house, all enclosed in about an acre of land. No wharf has been built or even planned, and in the extremely improbable event of room being required by the French fishermen for the erection of stages, the whole beach, with the exception of about twenty yards, is open to them; but their erection there, from its exposed position, is next to impossible.

Mr. Bennett's manager and family and twelve men comprise the working staff; there are also a few fishermen scattered about the neighbourhood, but none in the cove."¹⁷

We can see the reason for concern, since the economy and employment of the settlement depended completely on fishing and the small scale mining - although the prospects of finding a rich bed of ore were still good.

¹⁶Op. Cit., House. 1875, P. 749

¹⁷Ibid., P. 748

In an interview with Mr. Daniel McIsaac, a ninety year old resident of Port au Port whose father worked at the Lead Cove Mine, it was found that the mine appears to have closed for two reasons: the idea was stressed that the ore was not rich enough to be of any value; also, the French were responsible for the closing as they were responsible for so many complaints against it.

The next census return we have is for 1891. It is to be noted here that Berry Head is now called Port au Port East and The Gravels, Port au Port West. The population has increased from 15 - 83, including 40 males and 43 females, twelve of the males and fourteen of the females were married. There was one widower and three widows. 73 of this total population were Newfoundlanders, eight from other British Colonies and two from foreign and other countries. 77 were Roman Catholic and 6 Church of England. At that time, in this community, there were no clergymen, one teacher, one merchant. 21 of the males could read and 16 could write. 25 females could read and 17 could write.

The Gravels - now Port au Port West, at this time, had a total population of 123 - 71 males, 52 females. Of these 24 males were married and 23 females. There were 2 widowers and 1 widow. 117 of the 123 were Newfoundlanders, 5 from the British Colonies and 1 from foreign/other countries. 89 were Roman Catholic and 34 were Church of England. There was only one merchant. 21 females could read and 12 could write; 25 males could read and 17 could write.

Most of the people at this time were either fishing or working in the lobster factories. The fishery, even at this time, was not holding the important place that it held in other parts of Newfoundland. There were forty-one children of school age not attending school - some of them were working in factories.

The population of the community in the next ten years - 1901 was 336 and Port au Port East and West were combined according to the census that refers to Port au Port as a unit. The population had an increase of 136 inhabitants. Some of this was natural increase but people were also coming in from the East Coast. The fishing in this area was fairly developed, especially the lobster fishery, which was now one of the major means of making a living. Another reason for settlement in this district was the fact that the land here was very good for farming and thus a family could be almost completely subsistent. 313 of these residents were from Newfoundland, 2 from England, 18 from other British Colonies and 3 from foreign/other countries. 169 of the total population were males and 167 females. There were 60 families, 3 widowers and 5 widows. 217 were Roman Catholic, 86 Church of England and 3 Methodists. 86 females could read and 84 could write; 84 males could read and 83 could write.

The social aspect of the census return is very important. We, for the first time, have reported in the settlement a clergyman, a doctor, teachers and other professional people. Dean O'Rourke was followed by Father Hawkins as the resident priest in the parish. He was the only priest in the Peninsula. Dr. Scott was the first doctor in the area.¹⁸

¹⁸ Interview with Mrs. M.J. Abbott, Port au Port West

In the 1911 census the total number of inhabitants was 407 - 222 males, 185 females. 62 males and 61 females were married. There were 4 widowers and 6 widows. 393 were from Newfoundland and 14 from other British Colonies. Of these 303 were Roman Catholic, 97 Church of England, 3 Methodists, 1 Presbyterian and three other Denominations. 216 of these, five years of age and over could write, 100 could not. In the census return we also see the introduction of 1 clergyman, 5 teachers, 1 doctor, 5 merchants and traders, 14 were engaged in office and shop work. Thirty-three were classed as others - many of these latter group were working on the quarry. Many of the people were still engaged in fishing and farming. Lobster was still a very important catch. However, its importance was declining. This great decline was mainly due to the fact that the area was greatly overfished.

In 1913 the social aspect of the history of Port au Port can be much more developed than at present. The first licensed club outside of St. John's was set up in Aguathuna. The King of Clubs was a private club. It was officially opened with a big dinner presided over by the President, Mr. A. House, and the Vice President, Mr. A.J. Abbott. There followed many balls, dances and other activities to bring the members together socially.¹⁹

The settlement, by 1921, had expanded to a population of 546. Most of this increase was due to an increased birth rate since there were 191 children below ten years of age in the community. 279 of the inhabitants were males and 267 were females, 92 of the former were married and 89 of the latter. There were 8 widows and 8 widowers. 531 of the total were Newfoundlanders, 1 from England, 1 from Scotland, 10 from other British Colonies and three from foreign/other countries. 432 were Roman Catholic, 113 Church of England and 1 Presbyterian. There were 1 clergyman, 9 teachers, 1 doctor, 5 merchants and traders in the district; 12 were engaged in office or shop work.

The occupation of the people is of some interest. Although the number of people fishing has not declined (in fact it has risen slightly - the value of the fishery in 1921 was \$15,950.00), there are more people branching out into other areas. The number of mechanics had risen from 5 in 1911 to 19 in 1921 and there were 46 people classed in the 'other' group. Most of these men were working on the limestone quarry.

The next reference to Port au Port in the census returns is in 1935. In this census the total population is only 505, a drop of forty-one from 1921. There is an increase in the number of children who live in the area and also older people (over 55) - thus the drop must have occurred in the working age class. Aguathuna was still providing jobs but this was the only employment besides fishing where a man could make his living.

Of the total population 253 were males and 252 females. 447 were Roman Catholic and 58 Church of England. 146 males over ten could read and write, 159 females. 3 males and 4 females could read only. 31 males and 28 females could neither read nor write. 57 females and 70 males were attending school. The number attending school had increased from 92 in 1921 to 127 in 1935. The schools were improving and better teachers were available.

¹⁹ Interview with Mr. M.J. Abbott

In 1925 the total population is listed at 445. It will be noticed that Port au Port and The Gravels are done separately, even though the parish is still one unit. Gravels has 106, 70 of whom are single, 30 married and six widowed. Port au Port has 339, 223 single, 94 married, 22 widowed. 177 of them are males and 162 females. Of the 339, 326 were Roman Catholic, and 13 Church of England.

In 1940-41 Ernest Harmon Air Force Base was started at Stephenville about eight miles from Port au Port but it had not claimed all the working class of people. There are still 187 men working at Aguathuna and many of these are from Port au Port. At this time Aguathuna Limestone Quarry was the major source of limestone for Dosco at Sydney.

The census returns for 1951, 1956, 1961 give only total populations of the communities. According to these census returns Port au Port East and West are no longer one unit but treated as two communities. In comparison to the total population of 1945 there is an increase of 251 inhabitants in 1951. Port au Port East with a population of 484 and Port au Port West 212.

1956 census returns does not have any population for Port au Port East but Port au Port West has an increase of only 214.

1961 shows a drop in the population of Port au Port East from 484 in 1951 to 418 in 1961. However, according to the census returns Port au Port West has an increase of 268 over a period of 5 years.

The last available census, 1966, returns the total population of Port and Port West was 502, an increase of 20 over a period of 5 years: 255 males, 247 females. Port au Port East had a population of 454 - an increase of 36 over a five year period: 232 males, 216 females.

It is interesting to note the rise and fall in population from 1874-1966 in the communities of Port au Port East and West. To make it clear I have graphed the census returns of total inhabitants for these years.

Now that construction on the base has ceased and unemployment has reached the state where over 500 families in the district of Port au Port are receiving Government relief, something must be done to get the people back to their basic industries which were neglected when Ernest Harmon Air Force Base made good jobs available. Young people have left and are still leaving for places where work is more plentiful, especially Toronto and Labrador. The utilization of resources, especially minerals and fisheries, are easily capable of maintaining employment and prosperity, not only in the Port au Port Peninsula but throughout all Western Newfoundland and efforts are being made to attract the attention of those who can help develop these resources.²⁰

²⁰ Interview with Mr. George McCormack, Port au Port East