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Alaric Faulkner

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Pentagoet A First Look At Seventeenth Century Acadian Maine

Alaric Faulkner

Historical Significance

Although the French have had legitimate claims to the coast of Maine since Champlain and Dumont's attempted colonization of St. Croix island in 1604, little attention has been paid to this fact historically or archaeologically until comparatively recently (e.g. d'Entremont 1981: 2:199-338, and Cotter 1978). Nevertheless the French were frequent, if temporary occupants of the northeast coast of Maine from the first decades of the 17th century. From 1635 until shortly after 1713, half the coast of Maine, from the Penobscot river northeastward, was an integral part of French Acadia (Figure 1). Acadian history and archaeology, it follows, are integral parts of Maine's

Franco-American heritage, an aspect of that heritage which has gone unexplored.

Pentagoet was a small but impressive fortified French settlement reputed to have replaced a former Plymouth Colony trading post in operation at the mouth of the Penobscot from 1629 through 1634 (Webster 1935: 218; Wheeler 1875:12). Of enormous political and considerable economic importance, it was built in 1635 to mark the western limit of Acadian claims to the coast, and served as an entrepôt for trade with the native Etchemin groups, French settlers, and indeed the English. It is included on the National Register with three later English and American military sites in the Castine Historic District – all fortifications which controlled access to the Penobscot River. But as a surviving early Acadian settlement and trading post, the Pentagoet site is unique and of outstanding importance.

Fort Pentagoet was evidently built to serve as the headquarters of Charles d'Aulnay, Sieur de Charnisay, who was co-lieutenant general of Acadia with his arch rival, Charles de la Tour. It was here that many episodes in the

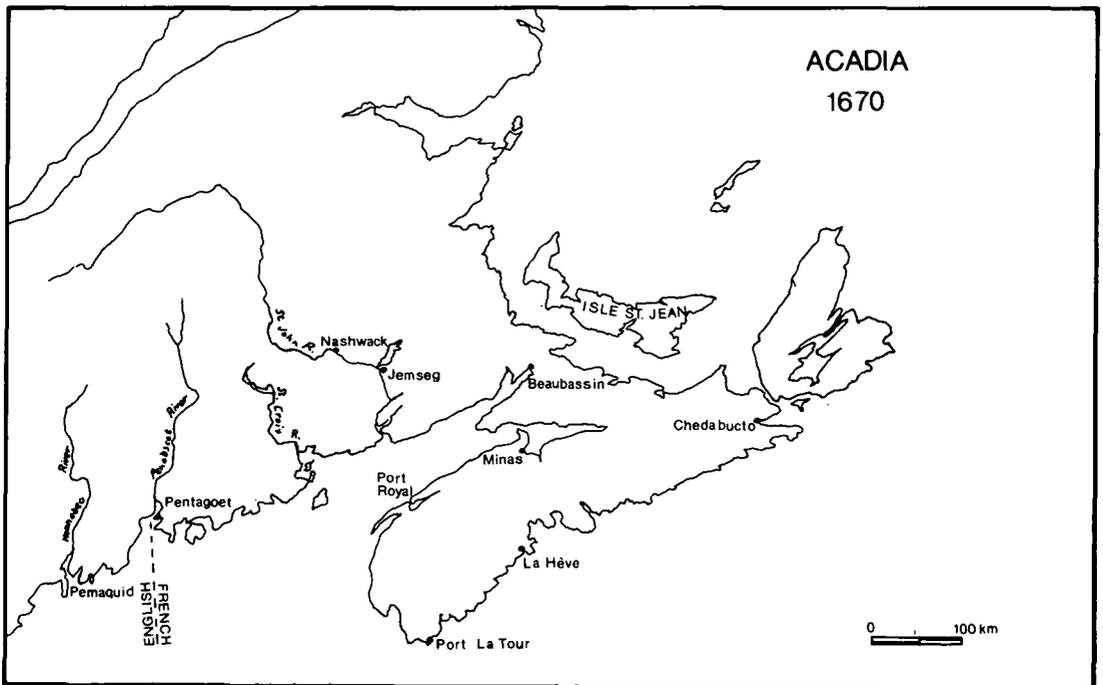


Figure 1. Principal Acadian settlements, c. 1670, showing Pentagoet as the western most outpost of French settlement (after Rawlyk 1973:32).

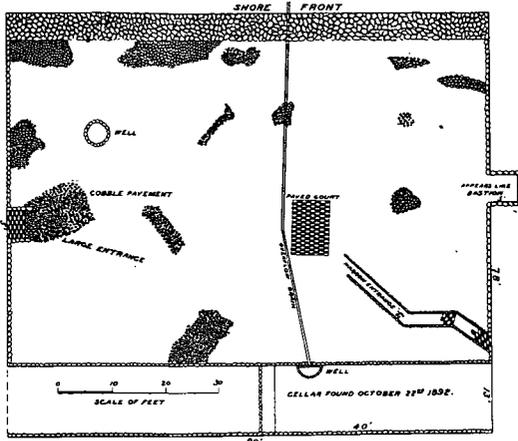


Figure 2. Schematic plan of amateur excavations of Pentagoet conducted in 1878 and 1892, recorded by historian George A. Wheeler (1893:120).

early drama of Massachusetts-La Tour-d'Aulnay relations were acted out, including trade partnerships, espionage, raiding, piracy, and reconciliation (Arsenault 1978:23-29; Wheeler 1875:15). It was this network of strained relationships which formed the basis for later New England-Acadian conflict towards the end of the 17th century. But what passed for a day-to-day existence at the settlement, apart from these dramatic political episodes, remains to be discovered archaeologically.

In 1654 Major Sedgwick, under orders from Cromwell, took most of the major Acadian settlements by force (Arsenault 1978:32-33). One of these was Pentagoet, and from then until 1667 Acadia was controlled by two Englishmen of Boston, and Charles de la Tour, the former French lieutenant general who had now won favor with the English. The cultural affinities of Pentagoet's inhabitants and their

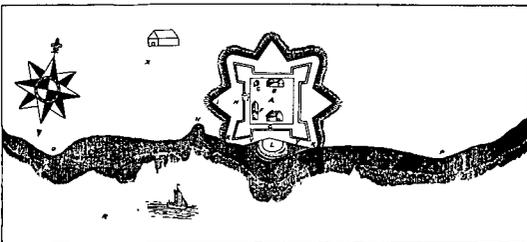


Figure 3. *Plan du fort de Pentagouet*, 10 novbr 1670, from an original in the Archives Nationales, Ministère des Colonies, Paris. (No key is known for this plan.)

lifeways during English occupation are matters of keen archaeological interest, as they bear on the nature of frontier conquests, and the practical reconciliation of political interests in regions as yet too sparsely populated to be defended effectively.

In 1670, as a provision of the Treaty of Breda, Pentagoet was restored to the French. It is for this time, when numerous plans and descriptions of the fort recorded the transaction, that we have our clearest picture of the physical layout of Pentagoet and the form and function of its structures (Figures 3 and 4; Wheeler 1875:209-219; Hill 1750). Hubert d'Andigny, Chevalier de Grandfontaine and new governor of Acadia, received Pentagoet personally, and made it his new headquarters (Arsenault 1978:35). Acadian expansion began in earnest. In 1674, however, the stone fort was looted, burned, and levelled by the Flemish Captain Aernouts a consequence of the war between the Low Countries and the French and English (Wheeler 1875:25).

The Dutch looting and subsequent scavenging of the debris by the English apparently put a permanent end to the great stone structure of the d'Aulnay-Grandfontaine period. Thereafter the region was occupied by Baron St. Castin, one of Grandfontaine's soldiers, who married into the Penobscot tribe and became an important chief (Wheeler 1875:17-24, 26-29). He and his sons in later years played important roles in rallying the Indians against the English at Pemaquid and in defense of the New England assaults on Port Royal (Arsenault 1978:66-79). It is clear from cartography (e.g. Southhack's *Coast Pilot* of 1690 in the London Public Records office and *Carte du Havre de Paintagouet* c.1688 at University of Maine at Orono) that Castin's settlements were moved to various other locations in the vicinity, and eventually were located farther up the Penobscot River near Old Town. Therefore the major remains preserved at Pentagoet belong to the d'Aulnay-Grandfontaine era in which the French made substantial investments in Acadian settlement and defense. It is this component which offers the greatest archaeological potential.

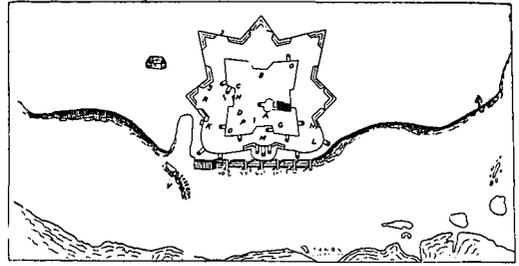
Archaeological Background

The coastal lot in Castine Maine on which the small Catholic church now stands has long been reputed to be the site of the "Old French Fort" (Figure 5). But because the site is barely 52 meters square and has been the victim of several episodes of 19th and early 20th century construction, amateur excavation and landscaping, its potential for yielding useful archaeological information was in doubt. Wheeler (1893) and Noyes (1907) mention five excavations between 1863 and 1907 for which the only significant record is a schematic sketch map (Figure 2). The notorious Warren King Moorehead (1922:166) also attempted to work at the site in 1915, excavating "so far as we could operate without damage to the walls or property." This probably meant that he was banned from the lawn area, and restricted to the bluff above the shore, where he was evidently attracted to a large shell heap associated with the fort. In any event, the records and artifacts of these excavations, if there were any, apparently do not survive. Finally, oral tradition holds that the lot was levelled with a bulldozer in the late 1940s at the behest of the parish priest. Fortunately, however, none of these potentially disastrous events has done extensive damage to the site.

When storm damage along this coastline was examined in the spring of 1980 as part of a student project, an impressive section of slate masonry was identified, protruding from the 4 meter high coastal bluff. A six weeks test excavation in the summer of 1981 was undertaken to determine whether these ruins were indeed 17th century French or merely extensions of the numerous English and American fortifications of the 18th and 19th century which are well represented in Castine. Also to be assessed was the extent and condition of the remains, to see if salvage or conservation measures were warranted.

Test Results

With a skeleton grant of \$2,900 provided on an emergency basis by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, a crew of five



DESCRIPTION OF FORT
PENTAGOET.*

A "The Parade" — a place cleared for military purposes — some twenty-five paces square.

B The magazine, which is about thirty paces long and fifteen wide.

C The guard house, which is about fifteen paces long and ten wide.

D A building upon the other side of the guard house, of the same size, upon which there is a small chapel and a belfry, and which makes a roof over the entrance of the gate.

E A dwelling for the officers, some fifteen paces long and ten wide.

G Another building of the same size for the workmen and soldiers.

H The entrance to the fort.

J The entrance to a small redoubt which is before the gate.

K The gate of the outer works.

L Two platforms, upon each of which there are two guns which carry eight-pound balls.

M Another platform with the fraises [palisades set horizontally into the ground] and embrasures of turf, where there are three pieces, two eight-pounders and one three-pounder.

N Small parapets at the re-entering and side angles of the exterior works.

O Two "lookouts" raised on the two angles of the bastions.

P The steps to ascend the rampart.

Q The palisades of the exterior works.

R A bakehouse and shed before the gate.

S A deep channel [of a brook] to preserve the water in the warm season.

T A cove for small boats [or a fresh-water creek bare at low tide].

V Wooden stakes or piles to hinder the flow of the sea [and prevent the boats from being washed].

X A bulkhead to preserve the earth which supports the outside works and platforms.

Y A hill which commands the fort.

Z The best and most advantageous spring on the island.

*I desire to acknowledge my indebtedness to Gen. John M. Brown for many valuable suggestions in regard to the foregoing translation, especially in regard to the technical military allusions.
G. A. W.

Figure 4. Pentagoet in 1670, reproduced by George A. Wheeler (1893:118) from an unidentified source. A similar plan has been located in the Canadian Archives in Ottawa.

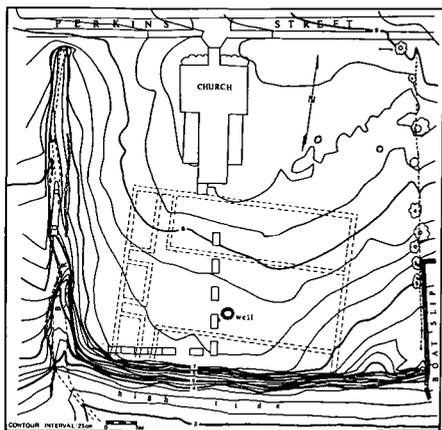


Figure 5. Contour map of Fort Pentagoet, Castine, Maine, showing segmented test excavations, 1981. Inferred locations of the structures within the fortification are superimposed.

trained volunteers exposed some 22 square meters of the site. A segmented L-shaped trench was dug running just along the top of the bluff, and at right angles through the middle of the church lot (Figure 5). Following this excavations, two days were spent by a volunteer crew from University of Maine at Orono, ICA, and Detection Sciences Group beginning a ground penetration radar scan of the site, locating subsurface features in areas as yet unexcavated.

Based on the moderately detailed first hand descriptions of the fort from 1670, four partially excavated structures have been identified with reasonable assurance: the commandant's quarters (wall A to wall C), the soldiers' and workers' barracks-workshop (wall B eastward), a cobblestone paved parade (interrupted by gutters), and the edge of a magazine (previously excavated in 1892). Associated green glazed white paste earthenwares, comparable to Saintonge specimens from Louisbourg (e.g. Dunton 1971:22) assured that the settlement was clearly French, while the belly bowl clay pipe forms clearly belonged to the third quarter of the 17th century. Other key determinations are as follows:

1. Great sections of the fort remain intact, little effected by erosion, landscaping, or previous hack work excavations. Slate walls in the officer's quarters and barracks stand as high as 2.1 meters, and

are laid up with perfectly flush surfaces inside and out, using only a clay loam for mortar. These are evidently the structures of the French "stone from Mayenne" described in 1670 (Wheeler 1896:10). The extensive rubble from the demolition of these interior structures and their common outer fortification wall have sealed their contents and adjacent alleys beneath tons of overburden.

2. Because the inner fortification wall evidently served as a bulkhead against erosion for many years, as much as 80% of the site may remain. Of this, based on preliminary radar data, *at least half* of the uneroded portion, 40% of the site, resembles that which has been excavated so far, and can be presumed to be preserved in excellent condition.

3. The inner fortification wall has apparently been undercut and washed away in recent storms, so that the open ends of two interior structures (the officers' quarters and the barracks-workshop) are open to the full force of the sea. The erosion rate has greatly accelerated, and between July 3 and September 3, 1981, a full 25 cm of the bluff has washed away, the result of normal tidal action, without any storms.

4. Artifacts and construction materials, both inorganic and organic, are well preserved in the site. Fired mud daubing and mud mortar, hand-forged iron fastenings, and charred timbers provide excellent data for architectural interpretation. Small amounts of parchment and cordage are preserved

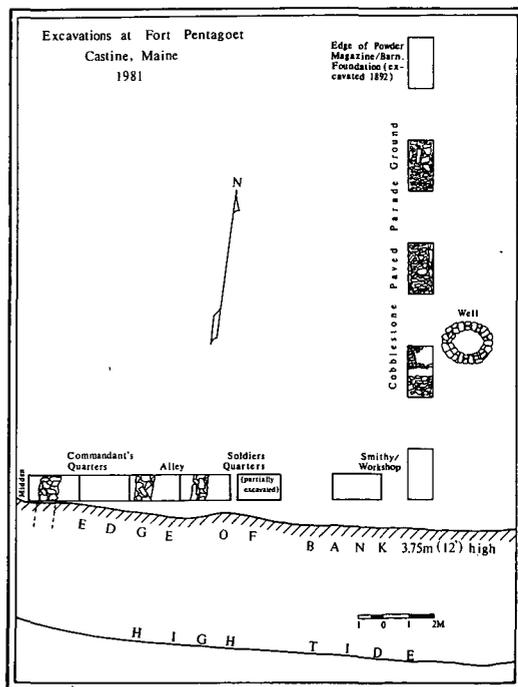


Figure 6. Detail of initial test excavations at Pentagoet.

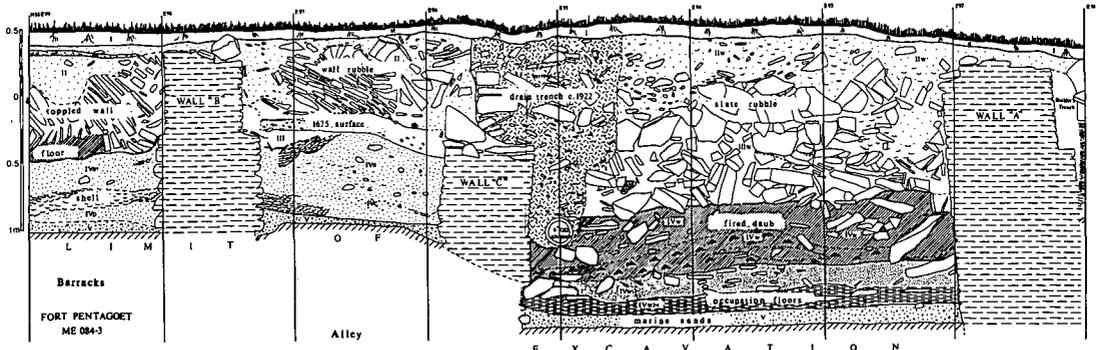


Figure 7. Section through part of the Barracks and Commandant's Quarters, taken from the south wall of the principal trench.

in the damper areas, particularly in the cellar of the officers' quarters. Earthenware and stoneware potsherds are unlike those known from English sites, but have close parallels at St. Croix (Gruber 1970:appendix) and in the Louisbourg type collections. In spite of the limited area tested, one complete double handled earthenware cooking pot has been reconstructed which has clear affinities to rare specimens from later sites: the wreck of the *Machault* in 1760 (Barton 1977:58-59) and the *Fortress of Louisbourg* (Duunton 1971:22). Other orange glazed earthenwares have as yet no known counterparts. Finally, Dutch and English clay tobacco pipestems and bowls of the third quarter of the 17th century are quite numerous.

5. One particularly promising area of the site whose function appears to be clear archaeologically, is a "workshop" area which was once probably in the same structure as the workers' quarters. Here was found coal, slag, and partially finished or damaged iron implements, surely from a smithy. It seems from preliminary examination of the materials, that the smithy may not just have been used for the maintenance of the fort, its tools, and weaponry, but also for the manufacture of trade axes. Also in this "workshop area" was much scrap sheet copper, and a core of dark European flint together with eight or more so-called "Dutch" type gunflints made from it.

6. The extensive d'Aulnay-Grandfontaine period fort is intrusive into a clamshell midden on the western corner of the site, much of which has been looted or has been eroded away. The upper stratum of this midden, very little of which has been tested, revealed a "belly bowl" clay pipe and an English redware rimsherd, possibly related to the Plymouth colony trading post (1629-1635). The latter is a mottled yellow-green lead glazed specimen, fired

black on the interior, red on the exterior, and is represented in several early seventeenth century English sites in Maine, and at *Plimoth Plantation* as well (Deetz 1981:personal communication). Other lenses of clamshell of both historic and prehistoric origins, have been intercepted in construction and preconstruction contexts beneath the floors of the fort, and beg explanation.

7. Though skilled interpretation is needed to distinguish intact walls from rubble, the new ground penetration radar scans promise to be invaluable in remote profiling of this particular site prior to excavation, and in locating masonry walls, paving, and iron anomalies with far greater precision than with proton magnetometry or any other known methods short of excavation. This technique, used in industry to verify construction materials in airport runways, highways, and similar building projects, should show demonstrated archaeological value at *Pentagot*, a first-time application on an archaeological site of this type (Michael Roberts 1981:personal communication).

Archaeological Problems and Research Strategy

For the past three years, the archaeologists at University of Maine at Orono and the Maine Historic Preservation Commission have been busily inventorying French colonial sites from original documentary sources and from field surveys in order to begin serious archaeological work in this totally neglected area. Notwithstanding Cotter's (1978) excellent attempt to bring together the scattered evidence remaining of past excavations at *St. Croix*, no

French sites in Maine, (and no early Acadian sites anywhere) have ever received thorough archaeological attention and publication.

A major excavation at Pentagoet, given its demonstrated archaeological significance and potential, is an excellent starting point. Despite its partial specialization as a fortification, Pentagoet can easily be the type site for recognizing architectural and material cultural patterning for early Acadia. No such type collections or settlement data exist at this point—Louisbourg, for example, being French rather than Acadian, and dating nearly a century later.

There are many aspects of early Acadian lifeways which can be pursued through archaeological evidence, and which can help characterize this little known period. Generally, the process by which French and Indian cultures accommodated to each other's presence and to periods of English domination is of critical interest. It should be possible to learn if the occupation of the fort was continuous, who were sources of supply of manufactured



Figure 9. Eroding wall and shell midden at Pentagoet, April, 1982. As of May, 1982, further erosion has claimed a full meter of this bank.

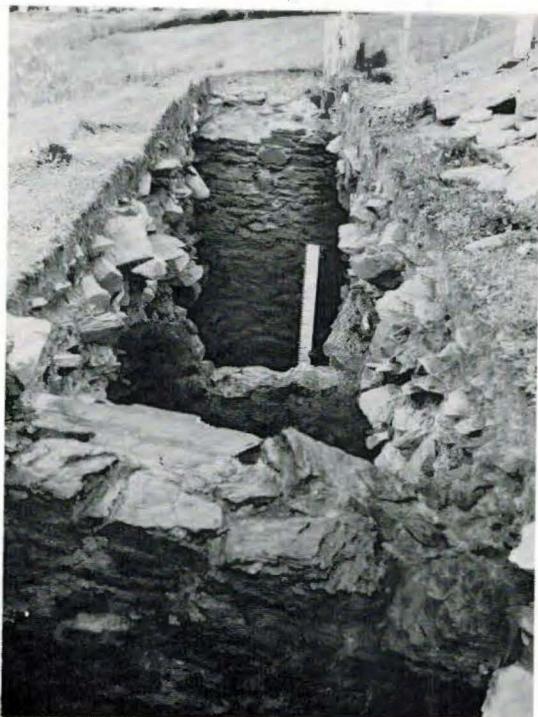


Figure 8. Principal trench, looking west into the cellar of the Commandant's Quarters, showing detail of slate masonry.

items, and to what degree the settlement layout was a French import. The nature of business conducted at Pentagoet and the relative importance of fishing and agriculture should be reflected in artifact assemblages and faunal remains, and can be contrasted to those of Colonial Pemaquid, Pentagoet's nearby English counterpart (Camp 1975 and R. L. Bradley, in preparation). Of particular interest, considering the potential "workshop" data, is the study of the on-site manufacture of subsistence and trade items. Food remains should be analyzed to see how livestock was used, and to compare the methods of food selection and preparation to the English foodways suggested by Deetz (1977:124-125) and others for first Massachusetts settlement. Finally, aboriginal assemblages should be examined to determine the prehistoric use of the site and to see what role Etchemin labor played in construction and garrisoning of the fort in these early years, as well as to expand upon the nature of trade and missionary work for which there is considerable documentation.

The University of Maine, in cooperation with the Catholic Diocese of Portland, is currently seeking funding for a three year program of excavation and analysis of Pentagoet in order to answer some of these questions. This research will complement efforts to construct a bulkhead to help control further erosion. We hope to retrieve as much useful data

as possible from the portions of the site immediately threatened, backfilling the extensive structural remains to protect them for future stabilization. In better economic times these remains may be re-exposed and prepared for public viewing.

NOTE: As this article goes to press, work has begun on a three year major excavation of Pentagoet, funded principally by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and supplemented by survey funds from the Maine Historic Preservation Commission. As of May 30, 1982, a large section of the southwest quadrant of the site has been exposed, revealing many of the features anticipated from historical descriptions, initial testing, and ground penetration radar survey.

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Author:

ALARIC FAULKNER

Associate Professor of Anthropology
University of Maine at Orono
Orono, Maine 04469