

**A TIME BEFORE MEMORY:
ARCHAEOLOGY ALONG
THE COAST OF SOUTHERN LABRADOR**

The earliest inhabitants of southern Labrador were Amerindian peoples of the Maritime Archaic cultural tradition who lived on this coast between 8,000 and 3,500 years ago. Before that, ice sheets of the last glacial age covered much of Labrador for many millennia and began to melt about 12,000 years ago. Due to the weight of glacial ice, ancient shorelines were much lower than they are today and under water. With ice melt, shorelines began to rise again and that process continues today. During the Maritime Archaic period, all the outer areas of St. Lewis Inlet, Alexis Bay, St. Michael's Bay, and onwards to Sandwich Bay were under water and home to whales, seals, and seabirds. This image shows humpbacks corralling capelin off the Battle Islands in 2009.



Because of the post-glacial effects of isostatic uplift, today Maritime Archaic sites along this coast are found at high elevations and well inside the coast. This approximately 5,500 year old site, for instance, is situated 40 m above sea level and about 2 km from open ocean.



The earliest inhabitants of the outermost islands such as Great Caribou Island and Square Island are known as the Groswater and were Pre-Dorset, Arctic-adapted peoples who migrated south into Labrador and Newfoundland from the eastern Arctic about 3,000 years ago. This archaeologist was part of the first major survey of southern Labrador, in 1991, and is diligently searching for tiny flakes on Great Caribou Island, St. Lewis Inlet.



Archaeology has shown that the Groswater also camped on Battle Island. It was ideally situated for capturing migrating harp seals in the autumn and spring, and other sea mammals and sea birds throughout the summer. A short journey up St. Lewis Inlet provided wood, caribou, and salmon.



About 1,900 years ago much of the Labrador coast was settled by another Palaeoeskimo group, the Dorset. Their occupation lasted for many centuries, ending around 1,100 years ago. Dorset sites are found throughout coastal Labrador.



The remains of a Dorset camp

Intricately worked Dorset stone artifacts once used for scraping hides, for cutting, and for hunting with harpoons.



Dorset sites have also been found at nearby Cape Charles, which was a thriving fishing community in 1991 when this photo was taken.



Amerindian peoples, referred to by archaeologists as the Late Precontact Innu (LPI), lived throughout Labrador at the same time as the Dorset lived along the coast. It is very likely that these two groups came into contact with one another. Dorset, for instance, lived around the Ramah chert quarries in northernmost Labrador and LPI preferred Ramah chert over all other stone for tool-making, suggesting that the two groups maintained a trade relationship based on Ramah chert.



This image shows an old campfire mound made up of ash, fire-cracked rocks, and hundreds of crushed animal bones of sea birds, porcupine, and seals. It belongs to a LPI campsite in St. Lewis Inlet that dates to about 1,200 years ago.

The most recent immigrants to Labrador before the arrival of Europeans were the ancestors of today's Labrador Inuit. The Thule Inuit, as they are called, migrated from the eastern Arctic and began to settle northern Labrador about AD 1300-1500. It was these Inuit and the ancestors of today's Innu whom the earliest Europeans in southern Labrador the Norman, Breton, and Basque whalers and cod fishers, met in the 1500s.



Sherds of Basque roof tiles can be found along the Cape Charles Cove shoreline, the most northerly known Basque whaling station. Inuit sites have also been found in this area.

In 1763, when the British took control of Labrador from the French, it was the Inuit they first encountered. Early English merchant George Cartwright left a unique record of life on this coast at that time (1770-1786). Archaeological work in the St. Lewis Inlet area has uncovered two of his stations as well as Inuit sod houses that date to that time. In the decades that followed, Inuit and English mixed-blood families formed a small, new settler population in southern Labrador. A boost to population numbers came in the early 1800s and continued for much of that century when Newfoundlanders began to settle this shore as a result of the cod fishery.



Excavations in 2009 of an eighteenth century Inuit sod house in St. Lewis Inlet dating to the time of George Cartwright.

One of the research challenges for archaeologists in this region is distinguishing Inuit-English households from those of the earlier Inuit. Several lines of evidence suggest that sod houses in the St. Lewis Inlet area were Inuit rather than mixed Inuit-English households. The sod houses studied thus far in St. Michael's Bay, St. Lewis Inlet, and in Baie des Belles Amours (QC) display several typical Inuit traits such as sloping entranceways, vestiges of sleeping platforms, stone fox traps (rather than metal traps used by Englishmen), and food cache pits. One house had whalebone planking. Glass trade beads were also found.



Whalebone planks within a sod house

A blue glass “seed” bead, used by Inuit to decorate clothing, especially women’s amautis. Beads were obtained in trade with Europeans.





Mapping one of the many pits in Old cobble beaches that are often associated with Inuit camps along this coast as well as Dorset sites. Pits such as these were probably used for storage of food items such as bladders filled with seal oil or for fermenting seal meat.



Mapping a collapsed fox trap that was built just below the entrance of an Inuit sod house dated to the late 1770s.

Archaeologists are outdoors all day, crouched over their test pits in often uncomfortable conditions. A warm fire, a boil-up for a good cup of tea, and the evening meal, are daily highlights. In closing, here are some of the delights from the 2009 field season.



There's nothing like bannock with a cup of tea



Alexander frittata, bakeapple sauce, and cabbage salad with Alexander



Steamed whelks



Fish steaming over onions