

ARCHAEOLOGY ALONG THE SOUTHERN LABRADOR COAST

- A TIME BEFORE MEMORY -

The earliest inhabitants of southern Labrador were the Maritime Archaic Indians who lived here between 8,000 and 3,000 years ago. Before their arrival, ice sheets had covered Labrador for many millennia and began to recede about 12,000 years ago. Due to the weight of glacial ice, ancient shorelines were much lower than today. Once the glaciers began to disappear, these shorelines began to rise in a process known as isostatic uplift that continues today. During the Maritime Archaic period all of outer St. Lewis Inlet, Alexis Bay, St. Michael's Bay onwards to Sandwich Bay were under water, home to whales, seals, and seabirds.

This image shows humpbacks corralling capelin off the Battle Islands in 2009.



Today, Maritime Archaic sites along this coast are found at high elevations. This Maritime Archaic site, once near sea level, is now 40 metres above sea level and about 2 km from open ocean.



Groswater Palaeoeskimo inhabited much of coastal Labrador beginning ca. 3000 BP. Their sites are not easily found but along this coast they seem to have favoured islands. Battle Harbour, for instance, was ideally situated for capturing migrating harp seals in the autumn and spring as well as other sea mammals and sea birds throughout the summer. A short journey up St. Lewis Inlet provided wood, caribou, and salmon.





A very similar lifestyle was enjoyed on Battle Island and elsewhere along the coast by a later Palaeoeskimo group, the Dorset, who arrived about 1,900 years ago. Archaeology has shown that Dorset culture was a separate wave of people from the Groswater. The Dorset inhabited the length of the Labrador coastal fringe as well as most of coastal Newfoundland - even the island of St. Pierre. Their occupation ended around 1,100 years ago.

The remains of a Dorset cooking area



Intricately worked Dorset stone artifacts once used for scraping hides, for cutting, and for hunting. Can you guess the purpose of each?

Dorset sites are found in most bays of southern Labrador. At Cape Charles , Dorset remains have been found on the islands and on the mainland.



Labrador was settled in turns by Amerindian peoples (such as the Maritime Archaic) who migrated into Labrador from the Maritimes and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, as well as by Arctic-adapted peoples who migrated from the Arctic. At different times, one group or the other dominated the coast and there are only short periods of overlap. Following the disappearance of the Dorset, Amerindian peoples began to appear along the coast. Their camps are small and hint at short-term presence and a preference for the woods and interior river systems over the outer islands.



Excavation of a cooking hearth at an Amerindian site in St. Lewis Inlet dating to between 1,280 years ago and 1,170 years ago. Thousands of fragments of animal bone were recovered that came from seal, sea birds, porcupine, and beaver.

Inuit peoples arrived from the eastern Arctic and began to settle northern Labrador about 1,400 years ago. It was Inuit who met the Basque whalers in southern Labrador in the early 1500s.



As in Red Bay, sherds of Basque roof tiles can be found in the Cape Charles area.

It was the Inuit who also met the earliest French sealers and cod fishers in the Strait of Belle Isle in the early 1600s. By 1735, French sealing posts were at Chateau Bay and in the Cape Charles area. Early gunflints and ceramics found on Inuit sites in St. Lewis Inlet and in St. Michael's Bay point to Inuit-French contact. In 1763, when the British took control of this coast, it was the Inuit whom they met. Early English merchant George Cartwright left a unique record of life on this coast between 1770 and 1786. Archaeological work in the St. Lewis Inlet area has uncovered two of his stations [see the slide presentation "George Cartwright's *Ranger Lodge*."] In the decades that followed, Inuit and English mixed-blood families became the new settler population of southern Labrador. In the early 1800s, many Newfoundlanders also began to settle this shore as a result of the cod fishery.



Excavations in 2009 of an eighteenth century sod house in St. Lewis Inlet.

One of the research challenges for archaeologists in this region is distinguishing Inuit-English households from those of the earlier Inuit – both groups lived in sod houses with sleeping platforms and used many items of European manufacture. In the 2009 excavation at Great Caribou Island, several clues suggested that this was an Inuit household rather than an Inuit-English family. These included the time period suggested by the ceramics, which was at the early end of Inuit-English unions. The sod houses were associated with typical Inuit features such as slightly 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 beads were also recovered.



Whalebone planks within a sod house



A typical blue seed bead used by Inuit to decorate clothing, especially women's amautis. Beads were obtained in trade with Europeans.



One of the many pits in cobble beaches found along this coast. These are often associated with Inuit occupations. Their purpose was for storage of items such as bladders filled with seal oil or seal meat. This one is in the process of being mapped.



Mapping a fox trap, now collapsed, that was built just below the entrance of an Inuit sod house near Battle Harbour. Inuit built these cleverly constructed traps in order to obtain fox fur for clothing trim but also to trade to Europeans.

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



There's nothing like bannock with a cup of tea



Frittata, bakeapple sauce, cabbage salad with fresh-picked alexander



Steamed whelks



Fish steaming over onions