THE FOUNDING OF L'ACADIE
THE FIRST SETTLERS
BY JIM BRADSWORTH

Modern historians have pretty well shot down the idea that Frenchmen were the first white men to set foot in America, and that one of them led the way for Columbus. But it could have happened.

According to the discredited story, a French navigator from Dieppe named Cousin was sailing off the coast of Africa in 1498, four years before Columbus's voyage, and was forced westward by winds and tides until he reached an unknown shore. On board the ship was a mutinous seaman named Pinzon who, after the voyage, was thrown out of the French Navy. Pinzon went to Spain, met Columbus, told him of his discovery, and sailed with him in 1492.

There is not much evidence to make us think the story is true, but who knows? We do know of other instances when ships were blown far to the west and onto strange shores.

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We think that Norman, Breton, and Basque fishermen, fishing Newfoundland's Grand Banks as early as 1497. The first reliable records of any French ship on the Grand Banks are those of Jean Denys of Honfleur, who fished there in 1504, and of Thomas Aubert of Dieppe, who was there two years later. In 1507 a Norman fisherman returned to Newfoundland to fish, and in 1508, another Basque fisherman, Abel Mas of Dieppe, went there. In 1509, a Frenchman named Giraud, who was also a fisherman, came to the Grand Banks. These fishermen were probably the first Europeans to set foot in America, and that one of them led the way for Columbus. But it could have happened.

The early fishermen who visited the Grand Banks made two trips each year, the first in late January or early February, and the second in April or May. They returned in September.

At first, these fishermen cleared the cod aboard ship and stored them between thick layers of salt. But it was not long before they found that cod could be dried on land, and that cured cod tasted better and was easier to store. The fishermen began to go ashore each summer, to build makeshift villages for themselves and drying stands for their fish. By 1519, the French, as well as the English and the Portuguese, had set up depots on Newfoundland, on Cape Breton Island, and on the St. Lawrence River.

Salt fish became big business, and they were sold wholesale in France by the thousand. In 1515 and in 1516, Le Bail of Brest sold more than 17,000 codfish to local merchants at Rouen. By 1529, the Normans were shipping Newfoundland codfish to England. On just one day in 1542, no fewer than 60 ships departed from Rouen alone for the Grand Bank.

But, except for the temporary villages, the French made no attempt to settle in the New World. For one thing, they were being kept busy with wars on the continent.

Jacques Cartier, lured by Indian tales of gold and of a Northwest Passage to the riches of Cathay, made voyages to the Canadian wilds in 1534 and 1535, and in 1541 he explored the Grand Banks. But a bitter winter and equally bitter Indians ended that venture.

The Sieur de Robevelo tried to settle on the Grand Banks, but met with less success. Then official France got itself involved in another war, and forgot about North America for awhile. But the fishermen kept coming.

By the middle 1500s, the fishermen, still drying their cod on land, had began trading with the Indians for a rich harvest of furs. The furs found a ready market back home, and official interest picked up in direct relation to the value of the fur and fish trade.

It was in the spring, April 7, 1604, that Pierre de Gua, Sieur de Monts, set off with Samuel Champlain and a few men on a venture around the southern tip of the Acadian peninsula. He discovered the Annapolis Valley, charted the Bay of Fundy, and, on minuscule Saint Croix Island, near the mouth of the river that today divides New Brunswick from Maine, put down a colony of 79 men.

Listen to historian Francis Parkman describe the place:

The rock-fenced islet was covered with cedars, and when the tide was out the shoals were dark with the swash of sea-weed ... (trees), in their leisure moments, the Frenchmen, we are told, amused themselves with detaching the limpets from the rocks, as a savory addition to their fare. But there was little leisure at St. Croix. Soldiers, sailors and artisans betook themselves to their task. Before the winter closed in, the northern end of the island was covered with buildings, surrounding a square, where a solitary tree had been left standing. On the right was a spacious home, well built and surrounded by one of those enormous roofs characteristic of the time in Acadia that would become one of the first permanent settlements in North America.

This was the lodging of DeMonts. Behind it, and near the water, was a long, covered gallery, for labor or amusement in foul weather. Champlain and the Sieur d'Orville...built a house for themselves near the spot that became DeMonts; and the remainder of the square was occupied by storehouses, a magazine, workshops, lodgings for gentlemen and artisans, and a barracks for the...soldiers, the whole enclosed with a palisade. Adjacent there was an attempt at a garden...but nothing would grow in the sandy soil. There was an attempt at a community, but the Acadians had settled in to stay, and that was first.

As another historian, J.A. Doyle, put it:

For the first time there was to be seen in America a colony of Europeans, not a mere band of adventurers or explorers, but a settled community subsisting by their own labor.

These colonists would call the place L'Acadie, a name derived from the work of the ancient Virgil, who gave it to an idyllic - if imaginary - land inhabited by simple, virtuous people. The name had been popularized in the 1400s in a novel by Jacopo Sannazzaro, which opens with a tribute to a grove of "uncommon and extreme beauty" in a place called Arcadia.

The Acadian peninsula is another theory about the name - that it was derived from the Micmac Indian word quoddy or cacid, which meant "an ideal or lovely land..." But folk who believe Micmacs on the land over an ancient Greek's imagination have no romance in their souls.

Vegetables would not grow in the sandy soil, even in summer, so the colonists had to plant their garden and sow their wheat on the mainland. The spring was dry, so fresh water had to be brought from the mainland as well. So also with firewood.

The first snow fell on October 6. By December 3 ice floes began to cut off the Frenchmen from the mainland garden, woods and water. A bitter wind blew constantly from the northeast, making it impossible to keep warm. Food froze hard, then rotted. Scurvy began to take its toll.

Thirty-five of the 79 men were dead by the following spring, when DeMonts decided to move his colonoce each summer, to the mainland garden, where he named Port Royal. It would become one of the first permanent settlements in North America.

All of the buildings on Saint Croix Island were taken down and freighted, plank by plank, across the Bay of Fundy, to a place later named Lower Grenville, the same materials were used to build a single habitation in the form of a hollow square.

This time, the habitation was well sited, fronting on the Annapolis Basin, its back protected by islands by a range of 500-foot hills. The Acadians had settled in to stay, and that was first.