

The 1750s were a decade of transformation for Nova Scotia. Three events dominated the history of that era, namely, the Acadian Expulsion, ordered by the government in Halifax, the colony's attainment of representative government, in defiance of Governor Charles Lawrence, and the conquest of the French fortress at Louisbourg by besieging British land and naval forces. This last mentioned event has been chosen for the second in a series of "Virtual" (i.e. on-line) plaques being issued by the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society.

Louisbourg, which ended by becoming a casualty of war, had been born out of military conflict. A protracted power struggle, mainly between France and Great Britain, finally ended with the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. The settlement redrew the imperial boundary lines in Nova Scotia, with the mainland area becoming British and Cape Breton remaining French, with little or no consideration having been given to the wishes of either local white settlers or native inhabitants. Until 1749 when they founded Halifax, the London government treated their new acquisition with relative indifference. In contrast, authorities in Paris moved quickly to consolidate their presence in Cape Breton by building an urban complex that combined military fortifications with thriving commercial and fishing operations. By the 1740s Louisbourg had become "one of the busiest harbours in colonial North America", with a large resident population containing a high percentage of women and children, evidence that the place had matured well beyond the status of a frontier outpost.[1]

Louisbourg's success bred envy and fear, especially in neighbouring New England which, when war erupted again in the mid 1740s, launched an attack in 1745 against the fortress which capitulated after six weeks, despite the amateur composition of the besieging forces. But Paris refused to abandon Louisbourg and, through hard bargaining at the peace negotiations of 1748, managed to re-



gain title to Cape Breton and its capital. Some have argued that this was a French folly, in that Louisbourg would again fall prey to assault and in the meantime it continually drained the royal treasury of money that could have been better spent elsewhere. But research carried out over the last twenty-five years supports a more positive assessment of what Louisbourg represented. The colony generated far more wealth for France through its fishery and commerce than ever was expended in its defence.

*Pierre-Charles Canot after a painting by Richard Paton, The Burning of the PRUDENT and Capture of the BIENFAISANT in Louisbourg Harbour in 1758, 1771, hand-coloured engraving, 36.5 x 57.2 cm, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, 1979-147.23.*

Very quickly after their return in 1749 the French restored Louisbourg to economic success through trade and the fishery. Learning from past mistakes, Paris doubled the size of the garrison and hoped to station more war ships in the local harbour, since lack of sea power had worked decisively against the French in the siege of 1745. As a result, Louisbourg in 1758 was a much more formidable

presence than it had ever before been. On the other hand, by the late 1750s the town faced a greater threat than it had ever come up against.

War between France and the Great Britain resumed in mid 1756. A year later British strategy was being directed by William Pitt, who had become convinced that the main theatre of operations should be in North America and that his government's overriding objective must be nothing less than the destruction of New France. Accordingly, an unprecedentedly large contingent of professional soldiers and sailors was despatched across the Atlantic. By June 1757 Halifax harbour had become a bustling staging ground as the British military converged in preparation for another attack on Louisbourg, its capture having been deemed an essential prelude to invasion of the St. Lawrence heartland of New France. Command for this unprecedented military venture was assigned jointly to Lord Loudoun for the land forces and Admiral Francis Holburne for the Royal Navy squadrons. In the end, the proposed 1757 attack came to naught; the French had succeeded in sending to Louisbourg a fleet that roughly matched the expedition the British had put together.

It would be the following spring of 1758 before London made a fresh attempt to capture Louisbourg, once again using Halifax as a rendezvous location and base. This time Major General Jeffery Amherst was in command of the land forces and Admiral Edward Boscawen of the Royal Navy squadron. One of the three brigade commanders, the mercurial James Wolfe, would end up playing crucial roles at several points during the siege ahead.

Meanwhile the French, under Governor de Drucour, had been active in their preparations, now having more troops, ships and supplies than had been available in 1745. In terms of ships, however, they had only a fraction of what had been in port in 1757. The local commanders at Louisbourg had embraced aggressive tactics to deal with the anticipated assault. Rather than remain behind their walls as had happened in 1745 they prepared to confront the attackers on the potential landing beaches, where the British would be most vulnerable to musket and cannon shot. This approach almost worked. When, on 8 June 1758, the British attempted a landing on the coastal approaches to Louisbourg, at what is today known as Kennington Cove, heavy surf and withering fire from the French forced the British under James Wolfe to order a retreat. Then a few junior officers discovered a sheltered and undefended beach and Wolfe signaled his men to join them. The British went ashore in small numbers, climbed and up a cliff, and from there launched a charge that turned the French flank.

Soon the battle turned into a siege operation that would last nearly seven weeks, with the French outnumbered three to one in manpower. Louisbourg's geographic isolation from the rest of New France, combined with the overwhelming power of Britain's Royal Navy, meant that significant reinforcements could not be despatched to aid the garrison. Meanwhile, daring military initiatives and meticulous planning, which included measures to minimize disease among their men, enabled the British to mount an ever-tightening grip on the fortress. Having become doomed, Louisbourg finally surrendered on 27 July 1758.

With Louisbourg captured the British could now commence operations against Quebec but not until 1759, given the length of time they had been tied down in Cape Breton. If the year of grace gained through French defensive operations in 1758 had enabled New France to survive, then

Louisbourg's reputation would have been enhanced. Even as it was, the British viewed Louisbourg as a continuing threat and thus ordered a total demolition of its fortifications in 1760, lest another peace treaty enable the French to repeat their success in Cape Breton.

Overall, it is now recognized that Louisbourg's rise and fall was pivotal to the destiny of both Nova Scotia and beyond to the rest of Canada. Far from being a useless extravagance, this fortress-entrepot had been an economic engine and lynch pin for France's economy in the New World. Revived after an embarrassing defeat in 1745, Louisbourg enjoyed a thriving renaissance in the 1750s and only succumbed when the British mobilized "one of the largest military forces ever to campaign in North America", [2] to overwhelm the port's defences. Regrettably, when peace was restored in 1763



and French investment shifted to its fishery around the coasts of Newfoundland, Britain, for over a generation, allowed Cape Breton to slide into neglect and underdevelopment. It would be two hundred years, during the 1960s, before Louisbourg was again reborn, this time as part of a federal programme which sought to turn historical reconstruction into an engine of economic growth. Today visitors can tour the site, preferably between May and October, and through historically-accurate restored buildings and accompanying in-costume staff, gain a vivid insight into the lost world of eighteenth-century Louisbourg.

*Pierre-Charles Canot after a drawing by Captain Charles Ince, A View of Louisbourg in North America, 1762, hand-coloured engraving, 31.4 x 50.0 cm, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, gift of John and Norma Oyler, 1995.96.*

[1] A. J. B. Johnston, *Endgame: the Promise, the Glory, and the Despair of Louisbourg's Last Decade* (Sydney: Cape Breton University Press, 2007), p. 14.

[2] Johnston, *Endgame*, p. 1