HISTORY OF SAINT-PIERRE AND MIQUELON

By Jane Sproull Thomson & Callum Thomson

Saint-Pierre and Miquelon is a French territory, consisting of three main islands located off the southwestern tip of Newfoundland's Burin Peninsula. Saint-Pierre is the smallest but has most of the population. The two larger islands, Petite Miquelon or Langlade, and Grande Miquelon, connect to each other by a long tombolo sand beach.

GEOLOGY AND LANDFORMS

Geologically, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon belongs to the 565 million year old Avalon Zone, a part of the ancient Appalachian mountain chain that today runs like a backbone down eastern North America.

During the Pleistocene Era, beginning two and half million years ago, glacial ice scraped the Islands—particularly in Langlade—which left a characteristic scoured appearance. This is evident in the form of erratics—rocks carried from sometimes-distant mountains by the ice sheets—and flour—finely-grained sediments ground off rocky surfaces by the slow-moving ice—lying on top of old rock layers. There are rocks dating back to the Paleozoic Era—ended roughly 250 million years ago—under the older rock layers.

The sand bar connecting the two Miquelon Islands is an active beach formed by wave action and only appeared in the eighteenth century. Most of the islands' woodland was cut for fuel over the years, except for a few areas on Langlade; the rest of the archipelago consists of mostly barren rock with some scrubby vegetation and peatland, the effects of deforestation.

THE FIRST PEOPLE

There is evidence of prehistoric native inhabitants on the islands dating back at least six thousand years. The most comprehensive study of the native occupation of Saint-Pierre was undertaken at the L'Anse à Henry site on the southwestern tip of the island by Sylvie LeBlanc, who is now the Territorial

Archaeologist for Nunavut. She found stone tools, charcoal from fires, and camp features above a sheltered gravel beach indicating habitation by Maritime Archaic Indians, Groswater and Dorset Palaeo-Eskimo (now called Palaeo-Inuit), and Recent Indian Tradition. There is no record of native inhabitants at the time of early European exploration; the last occupation dates available indicate the Dorset Palaeo-Eskimo disappeared from the islands over a thousand years ago. The museum in Saint-Pierre contains an excellent exhibit based on LeBlanc's excavations and research.

Native occupants of Saint-Pierre most likely travelled seasonally across the strait to the Burin Peninsula, from where they undoubtedly first arrived, to access a wider range of resources, especially land mammals and timber. The islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon lie on the edge of the rich waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence where cod and other fish, shellfish, and seals abound, and walrus and other large sea mammals were formerly present.

EUROPEANS ARRIVE

The non-native history of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon is one of early settlement by Europeans taking advantage of the rich fishing grounds near Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, and is characterized by periods of conflict between the French and the British.

When French explorer Jacques Cartier visited Saint Pierre in 1536, he made note of the French and Breton fishery in the region. By this time, Basque, Breton, and Norman fishermen had been fishing in the waters off these islands for several decades.

European settlements on the Islands are some of the oldest in the Americas, although the first were only seasonal as the Basque fishermen used them during the fishing season mainly for drying their catch. There were permanent French residents on the islands by the middle of the seventeenth century as fishermen began overwintering.

There were other French fishing communities neighbouring Saint-Pierre too, such as those in Fortune Bay and Hermitage Bay. Tensions arose between seasonal visitors to the islands and those fishermen who had settled permanently, particularly over access to the shore areas for drying and curing of fish. British attacks on the islands led to their abandonment by many of the French settlers by 1708, some decamping to Cape Breton Island (Île Royale), to live in the new French fishing colony there. The Treaty of

Utrecht of 1713 brought temporary relief, and France ceded possession of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, as well as Newfoundland, to Great Britain.

The French reclaimed the islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon with the Treaty of Paris in 1763, after the final fall of Louisbourg and the loss of France's possessions in Canada. French settlers returned to live peacefully for fifteen years, after which French support of the American Revolution led to a British attack and the deportation of the settlers. For the rest of the eighteenth century, possession of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon passed back and forth between France and Great Britain, as the islands suffered attacks by both countries along with repeated voluntary and forced removal of the islands' residents.

In 1793, news reached the islands of the trial and execution of Louis XVI following the French Revolution. Royal symbols in and around Saint-Pierre and Miquelon were removed. Many Acadians had fled to Miquelon after the deportations in Nova Scotia. As they remained loyal to the French Crown, Acadians opted to move to the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence rather than accept the new political realities. Later that spring and into the next year the seasonal fishermen and French military forces were deported after a successful British attack, and the remaining 950 residents were shipped to Halifax and held there for two years.

British fishermen took possession of the islands but French forces under Rear-Admiral de Richery attacked in 1796, sinking eighty British vessels and destroying the town. The islands remained deserted until 1816, but France finally reclaimed them after Napoleon's second abdication in 1815. There followed seventy years of prosperity for the French fishing industry and residents. However, political, and economic changes led to a slow decline of the fishing industry after the late nineteenth century.

SAINT-PIERRE AND MIQUELON IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Prohibition on the sale of alcohol in the United States from 1920 to 1933 brought an economic boom to Saint-Pierre and Miquelon when the islands became the transshipment point for bringing illegal alcohol from Canada into the United States. A French law forbidding the importation of foreign liquor was revoked in 1922, boosting the smuggling operations. Main products that were smuggled into the islands and then reshipped were Canadian whiskey, Caribbean rum, and legally imported French spirits and wines.

Many gangsters, including Al Capone, set up smuggling operations in the islands and fish workers gave up their regular jobs to unload alcohol coming in from Canada, Europe and Bermuda and store it in warehouses. A new fish processing plant was converted into a warehouse and additional distilleries were set up. As quickly as it began, the boom collapsed in 1933 as Prohibition was repealed.

The islands became an overseas territory of the Nazi-controlled regime of Vichy, France after the 1940 fall of France in World War II but were liberated by Free French forces in 1941. In the late 1950s, President Charles de Gaulle offered French colonies political and financial independence, but Saint-Pierre and Miquelon stayed loyal to France. By the 1960s, French government subsidies constituted half the budget of the islands, and the mother country continues to support the territory today.

Saint-Pierre is the territorial capital. Government is by a French-appointed prefect assisted by a privy council and an elected general council. Inhabitants are French citizens and can vote in national elections. Primary education is free and mostly Roman Catholic.

The fishing industry continued to languish over the last century and now fish stocks have fallen so low that fishing is restricted to recreational and subsistence licenses. With the French government's help, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon are in the process of diversifying their economy through tourism and other areas. Smuggling of alcohol and tobacco between the islands and Newfoundland is driven partly by depressed local economies, and partly by history and tradition.