HISTORY OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

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GEOLGY

Prince Edward Island’s visible geological history was written between 250-300 million years ago. Long before the age of dinosaurs, the Permian Period was an era of extreme drying for what was to become Prince Edward Island: at that time, it lay in a near-desert at the centre of the supercontinent Pangea. Sediments deposited by rivers during monsoonal flooding shrank during dry seasons and formed beds of red sandstones and siltstones. Tiny, lizard-like animals left footprints that fossilized in these rocks, and the skull and upper jaw of a mammal-like reptile, Dimetrodon borealis, were deposited near today’s New London on the island’s north coast. At the end of the Permian period, Earth’s greatest mass-extinction event killed the Dimetrodons…along with seventy percent of all land animals and ninety-six percent of marine species.

A few hundred million years and several ice ages later—eleven thousand years ago—glaciers were melting away in Atlantic Canada. Today’s rich offshore banks were coastal lowlands with sandy barrier beaches and lagoons. These lowlands were abundant in flora and fauna which attracted the first human hunters and gatherers. At this time, the present-day Magdalen Islands were separated from the mainland only by a narrow channel and Prince Edward Island was still attached to the mainland and part of an ancient landscape geologists called Northumbria.

EARLY PEOPLE

Palaeo-Indian hunters occupied coastal sites on what is now Prince Edward Island by eleven thousand years ago; they left behind stone tools, such as distinctive, basally-fluted spear points, typical of these early North Americans. The climate was much colder then, and these early settlers probably survived by hunting caribou—herds of which survived until European incursions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—and smaller animals, along with fishing and gathering.

Sea levels rose with the melting glaciers as the North American plate tilted downwards in this area. The lowest areas gradually submerged and disappeared under the rising waters by about five thousand years ago, taking with them most of the campsites of the early coastal dwellers.
The rich marine environment encouraged the development of a new culture which archaeologists call Maritime Archaic. Aquatic animals, like seals and walrus, could be hunted from land, but these people would have used boats for both fishing and hunting. Cedar and birchbark canoes developed for both fresh and salt water travel and are still made today and the designs remain relatively unchanged.

**MI'KMAQ**

Maritime Archaic culture gradually split into the various Eastern Algonkian cultures known today. Mi'kmaq controlled most of what is now New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island, and areas along the St. Lawrence River in Québec. They were among the first North American peoples encountered by European explorers.

Unlike other Algonkian nations, Mi'kmaq practiced almost no agriculture, instead continuing the hunting, fishing, and gathering practices of their earlier ancestors. They lived along the coast for most of the warmer months, and retreated into the forests during the winter; they would emerge again to hunt seals on the spring ice along the coast.

It was a rich world. Hunting caribou, moose, smaller animals and birds on land—and sea mammals and fish on the water—provided them with everything they needed: food, skins for clothing and bedding, and bones, antlers and tusks for tools and weapons. Mi'kmaq coped with the island's long, snowy winters by sheltering in the forest in conical wigwams made with poles and birchbark and lined with animal skins. Mats of evergreen boughs and more animal hides on the floor helped to keep out the cold, and a central fire was kept burning for up to a dozen occupants, each with their place within the shelter.

Mi'kmaq practiced an animist religion in which people were equal partners in the natural world and all things contained an enduring spirit. Hunters gave thanks to the animals which enabled them to live and treated the bones and other parts of their game with great respect. Clothing, shelter, furniture, tools, and weapons were made from the parts of the animals, trees, and rocks that surrounded them, or were traded for with other tribes.

Mi'kmaq families were patrilineal, and government was based on consensus and cooperation among equals, with each band led by a hereditary chief, the Sagamore. Each spring a conference of chiefs would gather to decide matters of mutual concern, such as hunting and fishing territories. These Grand Council decisions were recorded by a women's council through the creation of oral stories and the making of wampum belts, a visual history. Today's Grand Council performs a more spiritual function within Canada's government system.

Prince Edward Island was known to the Mi'kmaq as Epekwitk (changed by Europeans to Abegweit), meaning "cradle in the waves," and was described by Jacques Cartier in 1534 as "the fairest land that may possibly be seen". Members of two Mi'kmaq First Nations live in and off reserves today and carry on some of the ancient traditions. Lennox Island First
Nation, with archaeological evidence of habitation extending over ten thousand years, is the seat of Prince Edward Island's Mi'kmaq Confederacy and consists of 952 members. The 375 Abegweit First Nation members are split among three reserves at Morell, Rocky Point, and Scotchfort.

**EUROPEANS ARRIVE**

Norse explorers sailed into the Gulf of St. Lawrence around the year 1000 AD, as evidenced by the discovery of butternuts (which never grew north of New Brunswick) in the archaeological remains of their settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland. This camp was eventually abandoned along with their Greenland settlements, and the Norse retreated to a Scandinavian base.

Jacques Cartier was the first European to leave a written record describing Prince Edward Island, after sailing around Newfoundland's northern tip. Sailing farther into the Gulf of St. Lawrence along the Magdalen Islands, he reached Prince Edward Island on June 29, 1534. He made two further expeditions in 1535–36 and 1541–2 but concentrated his efforts in the St. Lawrence River area.

From Cartier onwards, Europeans pursued a policy of exploitation of the Maritimes' native people and its natural resources, causing the decimation of Mi'kmaq populations and the complete extinction of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland, the great auk, the passenger pigeon, and, regionally, the walrus, caribou, and wolf. Most of PEI's large game have since been hunted out leaving only red fox, coyote, and the introduced skunk and raccoon.

Within a few decades of Cartier's explorations, thousands of fishermen and whalers were sailing to the Grand Banks and into the Gulf every spring, trading with the Mi'kmaq for furs, providing guns, metal implements, and European clothing in exchange—along with liquor, to which the locals had no resistance. Fish was a vital commodity in Europe due to Catholic restrictions on eating meat, and whale oil 'lit the lamps of Europe' in the days before geology provided a substitute.

In 1603, Pierre Du Gua de Monts was granted patents for the settlement, commercial exploitation and governing of Acadia, the name the French monarchy had applied to the Maritimes region. Port Royal on the Nova Scotia side of the Bay of Fundy was the first successful agricultural settlement in Canada and encouraged more people to take up residence. By 1700 there were over a thousand Acadians and fifty years later, with a healthy environment and diet, early marriage and low mortality, they numbered over ten thousand.

Prince Edward Island was mostly neglected during this period and used mainly by Europeans to get fresh water supplies and for fish-drying. The first European settlements on the island were the result of a charter granted to Comte de Saint-Pierre in 1719, and although his company declared bankruptcy in 1724, by then French emigrants and Acadians had settled there, partly through his efforts and partly on their own initiatives. By 1734 the census recorded 572 people in eight hamlets. Fishing was still the main economy.
Shortly after these first settlements, war with Britain left France’s overseas possessions in jeopardy. Following the first fall of Fortress Louisbourg in 1745 a retaliatory series of attacks began on Prince Edward Island at Three Rivers and Port-la-Joye. The British feared that the Acadians, allied with the Mi’kmaq, were in thrall to France, and with England in temporary control of Ile Royale (Cape Breton Island)—and thereby Acadia—British forces began expelling the French population from Acadia in 1755, continuing until 1764, the end of the Seven Years’ War.

At first, the Acadian settlers on Prince Edward Island largely escaped the Expulsion due to a combination of military mix-ups and weather keeping British troops away. In fact, the French population increased with Acadians in Nova Scotia removing to the Island ahead of the British troops. As the deportations increased, thousands of refugees arrived on Prince Edward Island’s shores just as crop failures caused food shortages, creating miserable conditions for everyone.

In 1758, the islanders’ luck ran out with the final fall of Louisbourg to the British. On August 17, British ships arrived to begin rounding them up, and on September 4 the first transports arrived back in Louisbourg with seven hundred Island Acadians, the first of three thousand sent to France with only a few belongings. Seven hundred died at sea when their ships sank in an early winter storm. Those who survived landed in a strange country whose language and customs they could barely understand.

In 1785, many of these former Acadians opted to join their fellow deportees in Louisiana, where today their descendants are called ‘Cajuns’. Only two families made it back to Prince Edward Island: the Doirons and the Longuépées. However, between one and two thousand islanders escaped the deportations—some by hiding, and some by going to the mainland. Of these, some eventually returned while others stayed behind or went to other places such as the Magdalen Islands. But with the British now in firm control of Acadia, its future population would be English-speaking.

King George III of Britain changed the colony’s name to Prince Edward Island (after his son), and divided it into sixty-seven townships; he rewarded soldiers (and others) with settlement lots. In return, the new landowners were to pay for road construction, law administration, and government through ‘quit rents’ based on the land value.

The last major event of the eighteenth century to affect the island was the American Revolution. At its end in 1783, political refugees—termed Loyalists—fled the new nation and many went north, to double the population of the Maritimes.
THE MOVE TO CONFEDERATION

Increasing dissatisfaction with colonial government led by a lieutenant-governor appointed by Britain throughout the nineteenth century eventually led to a demand for government answerable to an elected assembly (‘responsible government’). This was finally granted in 1851, largely thanks to the crusading efforts of Edward Whelan, editor of the local Examiner newspaper, and a self-made wealthy local businessman, George Coles. A Tenant’s League, created in 1864, put pressure on the large landowners—many of whom had never set foot on the island—to sell their holdings to the farmers who had worked the land for generations. By 1871, only a quarter of the island was still held by large proprietors.

In 1841, Britain had given the name “Canada” to its remaining North American colonies. By the 1860s, three-quarters of the population lived in Upper Canada (Québec and Ontario). Leaders of the three Maritime colonies (“Lower Canada”) believed that a Maritime union would turn these relatively weak eastern colonies into a single, more powerful entity and eliminate problems inherent in three adjacent (but different) currencies and laws.

A conference was arranged to discuss the region’s future, to be held in Charlottetown on September 1, 1864. When politicians in Upper Canada heard of the planned conference, they asked if they could also attend, and permission was granted. The conference delegates, now known as the Fathers of Confederation, met in Charlottetown’s Province House behind closed doors. After a further meeting later that year in Québec City, the delegates drew up a tentative constitution for the new country.

However, Confederation remained controversial in the Maritimes and Newfoundland. With a two-hundred-seat House of Commons based on population, only forty-six seats would go to the region—meaning that it could always be outvoted by Upper Canada. In 1865, Prince Edward Island’s government vetoed Confederation by a vote of thirty-six to five.

New Brunswick and Nova Scotia finally caved in to Upper Canada’s blandishments, and the Dominion of Canada came into being on July 1, 1867. In Charlottetown, politicians continued to weigh inducements to join Canada, whose leaders were nervous about possible influence or annexation of the island by the United States. They continued debating the merits of an Atlantic region confederation with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Finally, on July 1, 1873, Prince Edward Island’s 87,000 people formally joined Canada with only two “nay” votes in the island’s legislature. The deal included Ottawa’s assumption of the island’s debts. It also included assurances that Ottawa would operate and maintain the island’s railway, provide telegraphic and steamship communications with the mainland, grant the island six Members of Parliament, and buy out the large landholders. A new sense of prosperity and hope was dampened as local manufacturers found themselves unable to compete with cheaper mainland goods. Over-harvesting diminished both the fishery and forests, and the prosperous ship-building industry disappeared. The advent of lobster canning changed the crustacean from everyday food into a delicacy—but by the end of the century, lobster stocks declined, and the island’s brief golden age ended.
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND TODAY

As the economy changed with the advent of the twentieth century, agriculture was the saving grace as the island’s deep, rich soil and sunshine encouraged animal husbandry and growing grains and potatoes. The island’s climate is moderated by the surrounding waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Farming is still a backbone of Prince Edward Island’s economy today: 25% of Canada’s potatoes grow in its famed red soil derived from the Permian sandstones. Fishing, aquaculture, tourism, and technology continue to expand.

The island’s present population of 155,000 claims mainly Scottish, English, Irish, and French heritage, although other international immigrants continue to choose the Province as a desirable place to settle. The Confederation Bridge, affectionately known as the ‘Flink’, (fixed link, as it was called during development) linking Prince Edward Island to New Brunswick (and the rest of Canada), was opened in 1997, becoming the world’s longest bridge over ice-covered water, at 12.9 kilometres.