

CHAMPLAIN'S MAP OF SAINT CROIX ISLAND

SAINT CROIX
ISLAND
1604-1942

By
Barrett Parker

PREFACE

A TIME WHEN THE WORLD is at war seems hardly appropriate for the commemoration of ancient landmarks and historical sites. But a time of business and cultural opportunism, or of economic depression is scarcely more so. Moreover, it cannot be forgotten that the subject of this little paper was first given historical significance under the most heroic circumstances. St. Croix Island was fostered in hardship and death, and its few acres of green-scrubbed and sand-lapped land are trained by exposure to become inheritors of the same.

Yet, strangely enough, in the course of the past three centuries this little island, set half-way between the Canadian and American shores of the St. Croix River, has gathered about itself the shielding garb of good will between two nations until it may be looked upon as a talisman of international accord. It is possible that its considered recognition will serve to tighten the bonds of enlightenment and understanding that already exist between the people of Canada and the people of the United States.

In this regard it is perhaps not amiss to mention that the Canadian Government has already taken steps to erect and safeguard memorials at Port Royal in Nova Scotia, where the Sieur de Monts, Samuel de Champlain, and the ragged remnants of their hardy band spent their second winter on this continent.

My gratitude and thanks in the preparation of this leaflet are particularly due to the late Professor William F. Ganong, whose scholarship stands as a foundation stone in the field. May I also tender thanks to Mr. Ralph Eastman of the State Street Trust Company of Boston for his interest and generous cooperation in placing a series of historical pamphlets at my disposal, and to my brother, Newton B. Parker, for his thoughtful reading and careful suggestions.

BARRETT PARKER JUNE

9, 1942

SAINT CROIX ISLAND

WHEN the motorist leaves Bangor, Maine, and drives over Route 1 through Ellsworth and eventually through Machias, he is reaching into the uplands and farlands of the finest of "down-east" country. With every passing mile of road the country becomes more rugged. The fern and brake are constant companions of tall stands of blue fir, and in the high country near Harrington is one of the widest views and most magnificent expanses of wooded hill scenery in New England.

A little beyond Harrington he gets his first view of the St. Croix River shining with a blue-silver border as it bends gracefully to the curve of the heathered land lying above, and with the farmed and wooded shore lands of Canada showing across the water. The country is spotted here and there with occasional farms, but for the most part appears much as it has for the past century. The villages of Perry and Cherryfield still bask in the summer sun as they did when my grandfather and great-grandfather drove their carriages to Bangor.

Some fifty miles beyond Machias, the county seat of Washington County, the traveller passes through the village of Robbinston, which at one time in early days was a very active ship-building town and later a center for the sardine industry, into the village of Red Beach. There is little to catch the eye of the transient in Red Beach. The village is composed of some fifty or sixty scattered houses and farms, with a school house, a church, a village hall and three small shops. In the hollow where the river dips in close to the main road are the ruins of what was the Red Beach Plaster Mill. This village, like so many in Maine, has passed from days of keen activity to days of decadence and slackness, and some despair.

But should the motorist, as he winds his way towards Calais and St. Stephen, look out at the river from the Red Beach shore he will see lying between the American and Canadian borders an island with a lighthouse upon it, and south of it in an almost direct line a smaller island, marked by heavy rocks and russet shrubs. The larger island is St. Croix Island, or as it is more commonly known in the valley, Dochet's Island. There is little to call it to the attention of the casual passerby and undoubtedly thousands pass by it every summer without noticing it. And yet, were they informed, they would perhaps turn a more tolerant and a more inquisitive eye upon this rather nondescript island, the present site of a government light and the historical site of one of the most stirring episodes in the history of this continent.

The river is approximately three miles wide in this section and St. Croix Island lies mid-way between the shores and west of the navigable sailing channel. Today it is a section of ground comprising roughly seven acres with a base of red sand and rock rolling up to swarded pasture land patched with scrub, shrubbery, and a few pines and birch trees. In years gone by it was a well-wooded land, but the woods have been hacked by interlopers and were shredded by a certain Admiral Owen when he made a survey of this region for the British Admiralty in 1847, or thereabouts.

There is little to distinguish the ground. The government light and keeper's house, together with a boat-house and shed, stand on the northern nubben. There is pasturage for the light-keeper's cow and there are facilities for getting out his boat. The visitor who lands on the island discovers at the northern end, near the lighthouse, a boulder in which is fixed a tablet commemorating the event by which the island achieves its unique distinction in the history of the country, and for which it so far has received a rather insufficient recognition. The tablet reads as follows:

"To commemorate the discovery and occupation of this island by De Monts and Champlain who, naming it 'L'Isle Sainte Croix' founded here 26 June 1604 the French Colony of Acadia, then the only

settlement of Europeans north of Florida. This memorial was erected by the residents of Saint Croix Valley in 1904."

It remains as the one tangible evidence of the tercentenary celebration held under the auspices of the Maine Historical Society to dedicate the landing of the Sieur de Monts, the Royal Geographer Samuel de Champlain, and that band of courageous and hard-bitten adventurers who accompanied them. On the 25th of June, 1904, off the northern end of the island were anchored the "U.S.S. Detroit," Captain Dillingham, the French cruiser "Troude," Captain Aubry, and "H.M.S. Columbine," Captain Hill. A tent had been erected and several notable speeches were made to the hundreds who were present. In the concluding exercises conducted in the St. Croix Opera House in Calais, Dr. William Ganong, a distinguished authority on the history of the island, said in the course of his speech: ". . . We celebrate today not only an event of great human interest, but one of the momentous circumstances of history, the actual first step of North America from barbarism over the threshold of civilization, and the first stage in the expansion of two of the most virile races of Europe into the wonderful New World."

The year 1604 came sixteen years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, and four years before the settlement at Jamestown. Up to that time there had not been a single European settlement in the northern parts of North America. Some attempts had been made, and had failed. As a matter of fact, the ownership of the country was open to dispute, England claiming it by virtue of the discoveries of the Cabots, and France doing the same by right of the later discoveries of Verrazano. It was under these conditions that the Sieur de Monts, a gentleman and soldier of the Court of France, in the year 1603 had proposed to the King of France that he found a colony in Acadia. By the terms of the proposal the Sieur de Monts was to bear the expenses of the expedition and receive a monopoly of the fur trade as compensation. The proposal was accepted. The Sieur de Monts was created Lieutenant-Gen-eral of the King for the country of Acadia, an area covering the

Atlantic coast of North America from latitude 40 ° to 46°, and in the early part of 1604 he assembled his company of 120 men to be embarked upon two vessels—one of 120 tons and the other of 150 tons. The assemblage was one of mixed talents. There were some gentlemen adventurers, some artisans, some workmen, some plain sailors, and a few tempters of fate and seekers of fortune. Among them went, as King's Geographer, a young man known as Samuel de Champlain, who was to become later a great man and to be known as the father of New France. He made himself historian of the expedition, and his journal is the original source of what we know today of that group of men.

In May of 1604, the vessels reached Acadia, and on June 16th, after some adventures, the ship carrying de Monts and Champlain reached St. Mary's Bay in Nova Scotia. From here de Monts and Champlain explored the Bay of Fundy in a smaller boat, a barque of eight tons, and finally entered Passamaquoddy Bay. Sailing on, they entered "a river almost half a league in breadth at its mouth, sailing up which a league or two we found two islands: one very small near the western bank; and the other in mid-river, having a circumference of perhaps eight or nine hundred paces, with rocky sides three or four fathoms high all around, except in one small place, where there is a sandy point and clayey earth adapted for making brick and other needful articles. There is another place affording a shelter for vessels from eighty to a hundred tons: but it is dry at low tide. The island is covered with firs, birches, maples and oaks. It is by nature very well situated, except in one place, where for about forty paces it is lower than elsewhere. This, however, is easily fortified, the banks of the mainland being distant on both sides some nine hundred to a thousand paces. Vessels could pass up the river only at the mercy of the cannon of this island, and we deemed the location the most advantageous, not only on account of its situation and good soil, but also on account of the intercourse which we proposed with the savages of these coasts and of the interior, as we

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should be in the midst of them. We hoped to pacify them in the course of time and put an end to the wars which they carry on with one another, so as to derive service from them in the future, and convert them to the Christian faith.¹ This place was named by Sieur de Monts Saint Croix Island." It was so named because of the meeting of two rivers just above the location of the island.

Here they set to work to fortify their island, placing some cannon on a small island since washed away, and in spite of the mosquitoes which bit them severely, they completed their barricades and sent back the barque to notify the rest of the party. When the others had arrived and anchored, all began the task of building houses and settling equipment. "After Sieur de Monts had determined the place for the store-house, which is nine fathoms long, three wide, and twelve feet high, he adopted the place for his own house, which he had promptly built by our good workmen, and then assigned to each one his location. Straightway, the men began to gather together by fives and sixes, each according to his desire. Then all set to work to clear up the island, to go to the woods, to make the framework, to carry earth and other things necessary for the building ... An oven was also made, and a handmill for grinding our wheat, the working of which involved much trouble and labour to the most of us, since it was a toilsome operation. Some gardens were afterwards laid out on the mainland as well as on the island, where many kinds of seeds were planted, which flourished very well on the mainland, but not on the island, since there was only sand here, and the whole were burned up when the sun shone, although special pains were taken with them."¹

¹ "Les Oeuvres de Champlain." From Volume III, Chapter IV of the Quebec Edition of 1870, edited by Abbe Laverdiere.

It is of interest to add at this juncture something from the description of Marc Lescarbot, who was a member of the expedition and whose book *Nova Francia* is second only to Champlain's in importance. He is a garrulous narrator, not always noted for his accuracy, but his picture oftentimes complements that of the official historian:

" . . . Within the fort was Monsieur de Monts his lodgings made with very fair and artificial carpentry work, with the banner of France upon the same. At another part was the store-house, wherein consisted the safety and life of everyone, likewise made with fair carpentry work, and covered with reeds. Right over against the said store-house were the lodgings and houses of these gentlemen, Monsieur d'Orville, Monsieur Champlain, Monsieur Champdore, and other men of reckoning. Opposite to Monsieur de Monts his said lodging there was a gallery, covered for to exercise themselves either in play or for the workmen in time of rain. And between the said fort and platform, where lay the cannon, all was full of gardens, whereunto everyone exercised himself willingly. All autumn quarter was passed on these works, and it was well for them to have lodged themselves, and to menure the ground of the island, before winter; . . ."2

In August the Sieur de Monts sent his vessels with the Sieur de Poutrincourt and Ralleau, his Secretary, back to France, and on the sixth of October the snows came. It was a severe winter for even this section of the country, and for men who were ill-equipped and unaccustomed to extreme cold it was cruel.

"During this winter all our liquors froze, except the Spanish wine. Cider was dispensed by the pound. The cause of this last was that there were no cellars under our storehouse, and that the air which entered by the cracks was sharper than that outside. We were obliged to use very bad water, and drink melted snow, as there were no springs nor brooks; for it was not possible to go to the mainland in consequence of the great

2 From "Nova Francia," by M. Lescarbot trans, by P. Erondelle, 1609. Introd. by H. P. Biggar. Courtesy of George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., London.

pieces of ice drifted by the tide, which varies three fathoms between low and high water. Work on the hand-mill was very fatiguing, since the most of us, having slept poorly, and suffering from insufficiency of fuel, which we could not obtain on account of the ice, had scarcely any strength, and also because we ate only salt meat and vegetables during the winter, which produced bad blood. The latter circumstance was in my opinion, a partial cause of these dreadful maladies." ³

"These dreadful maladies" were scurvy in its most foul and dreadful form:

"There were produced in the mouths of those who had it great pieces of superfluous and drivelling flesh (causing extensive putrefaction), which got the upperhand to such an extent that scarcely anything but liquid could be taken. Their teeth became very loose, and could be pulled out with the fingers without its causing them pain. The superfluous flesh was often cut out, which caused them to eject much blood through the mouth. Afterwards a violent pain seized their arms and legs, which remained swollen and very hard, all spotted as if with flea bites, and they could not walk on account of the contraction of the muscles so that they were almost without strength and suffered intolerable pains." ^f

As a result of the ravages of this malady, thirty-five of the seventy-nine men died, and twenty more were close to death. Consequently, when spring finally arrived the Sieur de Monts decided to move the settlement from the island, and on the eighteenth of June he set out, accompanied by Champlain and others, on a voyage that carried him as far as Cape Cod. The decision was made to move the settlement to Port Royal, twenty-five leagues distant. Two barques were loaded with movables and the framework of the houses, which were set up where the climate was more indulgent and living conditions more agreeable.

³ From "Nova Francia," by M. Lescarbot. f From Chapter VI, "Les Oeuvres de Champlain,"

In this inadequate way can be summed up the tragic history of a band of men, whose courage brought them to the island and whose hardiness maintained them during that terrible winter. It is a large segment of history to be stifled in so small a compass. The island was obviously selected by the Sieur de Monts because of its individual, and at that time, striking character. It offered what was considered the necessary protection from the Indians, who actually were not hostile. At the time of discovery it basked in a complacent climate offering no hint of winter severity. In other words, it was large enough for settlement and small enough for protection, and it is not unlikely to presume that had the winter of 1604-1605 been less drastic, the settlement might never have been abandoned, with the result that the St. Croix Valley would, in all probability, have become the center of French population and power in Acadia.

Life and death on this island flare into sudden activity and are as suddenly blotted out. The many years that have passed since the winter of 1604-1605 can be rapidly scanned. Probably no one lived there again until the winter of 1611-1612 when it was occupied by a fur trader, Captain Platrier. In the summer of the following year a company of Englishmen in command of a Captain Argal of Virginia laid foot on the island for which they had been diligently hunting, plundered the large salt pile left there by the French, and burned the buildings which remained standing.

In 1763 Saint Croix Island, together with all of Acadia, was ceded to England in accordance with the Treaty of Paris. Before the close of the 18th century the island was instrumental in establishing the international boundary line lying between Canada and the United States and, to that extent, influencing the peace between the nations. The evidence leading to the unquestionable identity of the St. Croix River was based on the ruins of de Monts' settlement discovered on the island, together with comparisons between the ancient and modern maps, and was accepted as final proof by the commissioners who had been appointed to examine and establish the boundary. On October

25, 1798, they declared the present St. Croix River to be the one truly intended by the Treaty of 1783, and not the Magaguadavic River, as some had consistently contended, and it thereafter became the recognized international boundary.

It is not entirely surprising, considering its location, that some question should arise concerning the ownership of the island. Despite the clear statement of the boundary commissioners the matter was not yielded without a letter of remonstrance by the British Agent to His Excellency Governor Carleton, dated July 7, 1799. However, in a later note addressed to Sir John Wentworth, the Governor of Nova Scotia, on August 6, 1799, he admits that St. Croix Island "does in fact lie on the American side of such line along the middle of the river, and also on the western side of the main channel of the river, and to the northward of a due east line from its mouth, if my construction of the treaty in this respect is not erroneous, it evidently belongs to the United States . . ."

And excepting the slight aberration by the Legislature of New Brunswick, which no longer ago than 1896, in a codification of the boundaries of New Brunswick, listed Doucet's Island as included within the bounds of the Parish of St. Croix in Charlotte County (three years later a new law was enacted to strike out the name of the island), possession of the island by the United States has not since been questioned.

The earliest authentic owner of the island on record was a John Brewer of Robbinston who, on March 1, 1820, bought both islands, Dochet and Little Dochet, from the Commissioners of the District of Maine in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the sum of thirty dollars. John Brewer was a prominent citizen of Robbinston. He shortly afterwards sold St. Croix Island to his brother, Stephen Brewer, for six hundred dollars making therewith no small profit, in the brief space of six years. In 1856 the "two undivided third parts of the northerly half of St. Croix Island, containing two and one-half acres of upland, more or less, with the beach and flats pertaining to the said northern half" were sold to the United States as location for a government light station. The station was established the

following year, 1857, and two years later, in 1859, was discontinued for ten years. But in 1869 it was reestablished and has been in service since then.

On May 5, 1869 the heirs of Stephen Brewer sold their portion of the island to four men, Charles H. Newton, Joseph A. Lee, Herbert Barnard and Benjamin F. Kelley, and relinquished all claims to the southerly part of the island "beginning at a mark (x) in the ledge in a small cove on the westerly side of the island near highwater mark thence running S.63° E. about 22 rods across the island to a marked birch tree on the easterly bank or shore of the island, thence following the shore southerly westerly and northerly around the southerly part of the island to the mark in the ledge . . . containing three acres of upland more or less with the beach or flats pertaining to the same."⁴

It is that section of the island which is the primary concern of this leaflet. During the course of the years since that bleak winter of 1604 the island has been subject to many other harsh winters and to the high running tides of the river. A washing away of the island is evident, and the loss that has accrued over the period of nearly three and a half centuries can be discovered by comparing the early maps of the island with its present condition. The loss has been very little on the northern and western sides, but heavy on the southern and southwestern sides, including the site of the cemetery of 1604, and the knoll on which de Monts mounted his cannon, together with much of the island north of Wright's Nubble. The process of washing still continues, and the time can be foreseen when the soil, unless bastioned, may be entirely lost. By engineering skill, and with adequate and timely bulwarking, the island can still be preserved. Some ten years ago, the present owners floated out heavy timbers which were landed, chained, and spiked on the southern shore. But the run of the tide and the wash of the sand

⁴ From Washington County Deeds, Vol. 122, P. 162.

has moved and buried them, and largely rendered them ineffective.

The nation has seen fit to preserve and restore historical sites of no greater significance than St. Croix Island. Jamestown and Plymouth are known and recognized as stepping stones in the pageant of American history. So, also, should St. Croix Island be. But if action is to be taken to save this tattered little island, to reinforce it against the sea-swung tide, and to set upon it some appropriate memorial, such action must be taken in the near future. In the course of another few years the wash will be extended, the island may be broken, and the whole problem of preservation may become so difficult that its rehabilitation will be impossible.

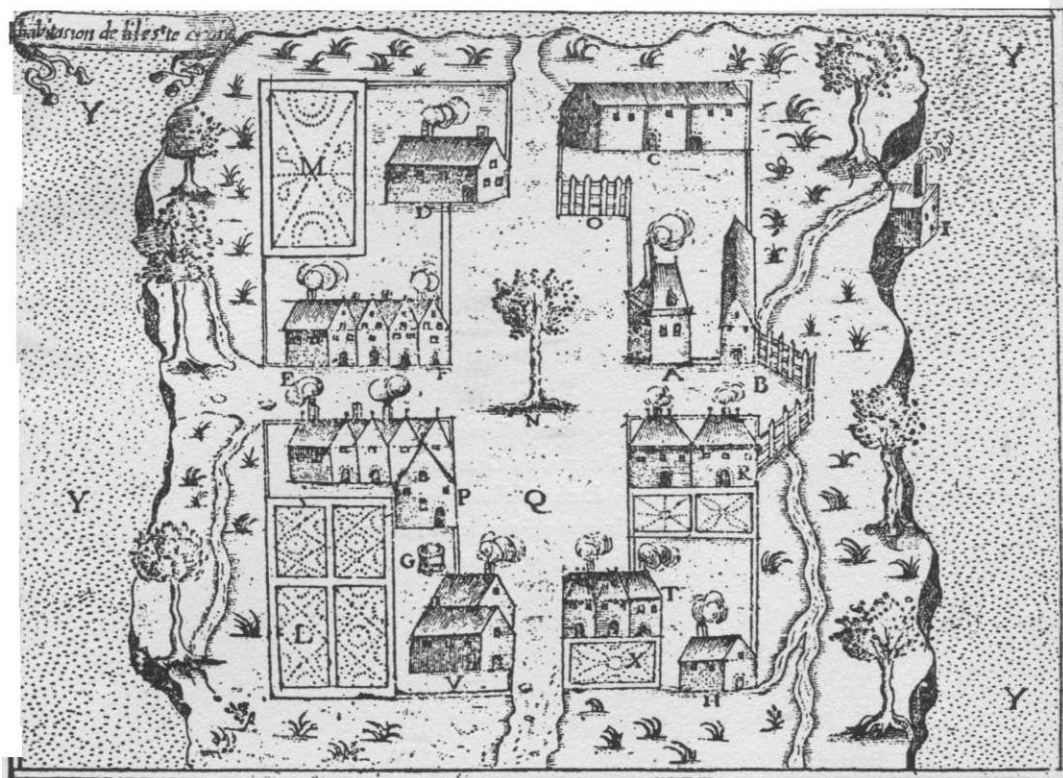
At this time there are several alternatives possible with regard to the future of the island. First of all, it may be left in its present unprotected and comparatively unrecognized condition. That, however, is scarcely a solution, either of the problem of preservation, or of the formation of a suitable memorial. Secondly, the island could be purchased by an individual aware of its status in the history of the continent, and donated to the State or the Federal Government as a part of the National Park System. Thirdly, it could be taken over by the State of Maine and incorporated among its historical sites. Lastly, it could be purchased by the National Park System and made a part of the Acadia National Park where it rightly has a place.

Whatever alternative may be adopted for purposes of preserving the island, the most appropriate memorial would be the re-erection of the settlement of the Sieur de Monts as it was in the summer of 1606—with a boat to carry sight-seers from the mainland at Red Beach, a ten-minute run, to a landing somewhere on the southern part of the island. This memorial is wholly practicable, since there is an excellent map by Cham-

plain of De Monts' settlement, from which the old buildings could be rebuilt. Such a reconstruction would stand as a fitting and necessary monument to the historical importance of this little island which, despite its size, is rivalled in significance in the annals of our country only by Jamestown and the early settlements of the Spanish conquistadores. It would serve to crystalize further the sense of kinship and the mutual respect which continue to bind the peoples living on either side of the International Line. In its own right, by virtue of a physical representation of the past, it would have intrinsic as well as symbolic interest for the thousands of motorists, both Canadian and American, who now pass by, totally unaware of how close they are to one of the earliest and most noteworthy landmarks of their history. And finally, it would exert a stimulating and extensive influence upon the entire surrounding countryside.

Any program of preservation will represent some expense, although the expense of purchase need not be great, and the expense of preservation would depend largely on the extent of the program undertaken. Since the present owners have done all that they can for its preservation, the rescue and rehabilitation of Saint Croix Island now depends upon the historical perspective, the foresight and the organized talents of a broader endeavor than they as individuals can exert. It is needlessly depressing to consider that the scene of Champlain's first settlement in the New World may be lost, irretrievably, through neglect and through lack of interest at the proper time.⁵

⁵ The reader who is interested in further information about St. Croix Island will find the following books of value: "Dochet (St. Croix Island)", by W. F. Ganong, Trans. of Royal Society of Canada, Vol. VIII, Section IV; "France and New England", State Street Trust Co., Boston, 1929; "The Works of Samuel de Champlain", The Champlain Society, Toronto, 1922, Vol. I, Part III, Chapters IV, VI.



PLAN OF THE FRENCH SETTLEMENT ON SAINT CROIX ISLAND

"A" at the right shows De Monts' dwelling, which, with the storehouse marked "C", was, according to Lescarbot, constructed of timber brought from France.

"D" shows where the Swiss professional soldiers lived. "E" is the blacksmith shop.

"F" is the carpenter's dwelling, "G" an old well, "H" in the foreground is the bake-house, "I" at the extreme right is the kitchen.

"L" and "M" at the left and "X" are the gardens, "O" the palisade. Champlain lived in the house marked "P".

"V" marks the dwelling of the priest.

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