

# St. Croix Island

By Doris R. Marston



At the far northeastern tip of Maine, not far from Passamaquoddy Bay, the St. Croix River curves its silver-blue length between the shores of the Pine Tree State and those of its good neighbor, Canada. Midway in the river near Red Beach, Maine, lies a tiny island with a United States lighthouse on it, and a still smaller island, a wilderness of rocks and underbrush. The island has been called by various names - Dochet, Neutral, Schoodic, DeMonts - but its true name is Isle Sainte Croix, or "Island of the Holy Cross", and it was so named by the first settlers because it lay in a cross formed by the adjacent rivers. St. Croix lay unnoticed, save by transient Indians, until June 26, 1904, when an expedition led by Sieur deMonts and Samuel de Champlain landed there and built the first European settlement of the

great Northeast.

King George IV of France had granted Pierre de Guast, the Sieur de Monts, much land: from New Jersey to New Brunswick, an extensive coastline indeed. He was given vice regal authority over it and with his expedition, set sail from Havre de Grace, April 17, 1604.

DeMonts was a gentleman-ordinary of the King's bedchamber, a wealthy Huguenot merchant and governor of Pons. He has made one voyage to the St. Lawrence region and had seen in the fur trade an opportunity for big business. Using the fur trade as a basis, he was commissioned by the King to establish New France. King Henry made him lord of Acadia, said to be the first use made of the word, and gave him the same territory King James of England was to give the Plymouth Colony sixteen years later.

Samuel de Champlain joined the expedition with a promise to the King that he would write an account of the voyage. If it had not been for the records of Champlain, little of the early French history along the Maine coast could have been preserved. It has been said that next to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, more memorials have been erected to Champlain in the United States than to any other historic figure.

Leading the party, besides deMonts and Champlain, were Baron de Poutrincourt and the Count d'Orville. In the group were Huguenots and Catholics, ministers and priests, carpenters, mechanics, farmers, blacksmiths, soldiers and servants, all, as they believed, well-equipped for new life in a strange land.

Cruising along the rugged coast of the new World, the vessels sailed up the Bay of Fundy in



Canada, reached the harbor of Digby, Nova Scotia, and set up temporary camps at Port Royal. Sailing westward, they at last entered what was to be named Passamaquoddy Bay. DeMonts and his band were wary of Indians and realized they must establish their settlement in a place which would be safe from them and from wild animals.

St. Croix seemed the perfect spot, located as it was in mid-river, with the salt water a safe barrier and the height serving as a vantage point for protection. Plenty of woodlands on the nearby coast would augment the sawn lumber they had brought from France.

The island lay warm in the June sun as the expedition landed, planted the French flag and set up the Catholic cross. Immediately the men began work on their homes and community buildings. Trees were felled, streets of a sort set out and partly paved with cobblestones, cannon mounted at either end of the little island, a bakery set up with a brick oven, and blacksmith shop, church and houses quickly erected. About a dozen houses were arranged around a court and connected together with strong palisades forming a rude but efficient fort. The details of the settlement are clearly shown in a picture plan drawn by Champlain. The buildings included a storehouse and a common meeting hall, and each house was built and occupied by a number of men on a clubhouse basis. In cleared fields on Maine and Canadian shores gardens were planted, while small gardens were planted on the island shore.

The workers were discovered by a band of Indians, who would have fought unless the French had offered signs of peace. The Indian Chief was baptised, and ever since, the Passamaquoddy Indians have been peaceful and church-going.

In the early fall DeMonts decided to send ships back to France for more men and additional supplies. Seventy-nine men, believed to be well provided with warm clothing and food, were left behind. By October an early winter had set in with a heavy snowfall. The Frenchmen had had no experience which would prepare them for such weather, for they were the first to winter here since the hardy Norsemen. They had failed to build their houses substantially enough to keep out the howling coastal winds. The supply of

drinking water gave out, and the river had frozen over just enough to make it impossible either to row or walk to the mainland for water, fuel and game.

Christmas found them still well, but far from happy. That December 25, 1604, was the first religious celebration of the Birth of the Christ Child in the northern New World. The only other European settlement was in Spanish Florida. In what was without doubt the first "community church", both Protestants and Catholics held their services, led by a Huguenot minister and a Catholic missionary.

To wile away the hours a little newspaper was issued called *Master William*. Although it has been generally supposed that the *Boston News Letter* of 1704 was the first newspaper, 100 years before that DeMont's men laboriously printed the "news" by hand with a quill pen. A special issue was read just after the Christmas religious exercises, before the holiday feast began. Master William was King Henry IV's court jester, and it may be that his name was given to the little newspaper because much of the "news" was of a jesting sort.

As the winter grew more severe, the unhappy Frenchmen huddled about their meager fires. Vegetables ran out, and scurvy brought many of the men low. It is interesting to note that those who remained well were the ones who kept active - fishing, skating and wrestling. Before spring thirty or more had died, including the priest and the minister. The cemetery where they were buried and the chapel on the lower part of the island have been washed away by the tides of the years.

M. Lescarbot, whose book *Nova Francia*, is second only to Champlain's in importance, wrote: "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 not cellars under our storehouse, and 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 not springs nor brooks; for it was not possible to go to the mainland in consequence of the great pieces of ice drifted by the tide, which varies three fathoms between low and high water. Work on the handmill 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 . . . ."

Never was spring so welcome as it was to those on St. Croix that 1605. The half-starved survivors abandoned their settlement when the ships came back. Although they sailed down the coast to Massachusetts, they found no place to suit them, so they decided to settle at Port Royal in Canada. How different Maine's future history might have been!

Down in Virginia the governor, Sir Thomas Dale, heard that the French had settled in English territory and sent Thomas Argall to put them out. Argall plundered and burned what was left of St. Croix. Then for years the two small islands, which were really one, lay deserted except for an occasional fur trader or passing Indian. Its early history might have been forgotten forever, if the disagreements of the French and English had not extended to the boundaries of Canada and the United States.

By the 1763 Treaty of Paris, St. Croix Island, together with all Acadia, was ceded to England. The Treaty of 1783 provided that the St. Croix River be the true boundary line between the two countries, but it could not be decided which of the three rivers was the right one until a Canadian-American commission came to St. Croix Island. There, spading uncovered cannon balls, farming implements, tools, crockery, bricks from the old bakery, ruins of small houses and other materials which showed beyond doubt that this was the place which DeMonts had planned to make a flourishing settlement.

In 1946 Senator Brewster proposed that the Department of the Interior take over St. Croix Island as a historical center of international good will between the people of the United States and Canada. The Board of National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings and Monuments in 1948 declared St. Croix Island a historic site. A national monument will be established by legislation already prepared. Some fifteen acres on the mainland will be acquired as an approach and parking space and ferry pier.

DeMonts and his followers would be amazed if they could know of what historic importance their little settlement had become. Now at last, 350 years later, their little Island of St. Croix is to receive due honor as a center of international good will.