

[Page 35 - New England's Role in the Underdevelopment of Cape Breton during the French Regime, 1713-58](#)

ISSUE : [Issue 21](#)

Published by Ronald Caplan on 1978/12/1

sloops, and shallops themselves, the supplies were varied as well as plentiful but from the records we have they consisted mostly of livestock, meat, butter, cheese and eggs, grains and flour, potatoes, onions, apples, cider and the like, and building materials of various kinds. The attraction of New England shipmasters to Cape Breton lay not only in the fish they could buy but in the plentiful supplies of goods from France and especially from the French West Indies that were available there. The largest items by far in the return cargoes to New England were rum and molasses which New Englanders could not obtain in the British Antilles in quantities nearly adequate to colonial demands. As a result, Cape Breton became a major trading entrepot in the northwestern Atlantic in the period 1720-45 and again in 1749-55. Moreover, the secular trend showed a steady decrease in the numbers of vessels coming from France and Canada and an equally steady increase in those coming from New England. Thus, in 1752, the bulk of goods arriving in the island from the West Indies (654,680 livres worth of a total of 1,180,247 livres) was reshipped to New England, including more than half the value of Cape Breton's receipts of rum, molasses, and coffee, and nearly all of the raw sugar. These are the only quantities of which we have record, but it is probable that informal trade in the Canso-Isle Madame region, where neither of the overlapping claims of France and Britain could be enforced consistently, reached proportions at times exceeding that at Louisbourg. Certainly, it was in this southern region of Cape Breton that one restriction rigorously enforced by colonial French authorities (when they could) was most easily and often evaded • that is, the restriction against the sale of dried codfish to New Englanders who had a ready market for it in both the West Indies and Europe. At Boston and other home ports, New England vessels were under their own restrictions about trade with Cape Breton, but they found it easy to clear for Annapolis Royal, Canso, or St. John's when outward bound for Louisbourg. As indicated above, New England's shipbuilders largely sustained the needs of Cape Breton for fishing boats and larger bottoms for the Banks' fishery and trading operations. There was some local shipbuilding activity on and off at Louisbourg, Little Bras-D'Or, Port-Dauphin (St. Anns), Niganiche (Ingonish), Scataray, and Port-Toulouse (St. Peters), but the great supply of vessels came from the south.

**CONCLUSION** The relatively full documentary records of the French regime in Cape Breton Island from 1713 to 1758 (together with those of the British during its four-year hiatus from 1745 to 1749) reveal that there never was a significantly large population on the island, that it was always peripheral, and that the eyes of the people in the scattered ports, coves, and harbours were focused almost constantly on the sea for fish or trade. There was little lumbering except along the Mira where the few real farms were also located, and what timber was produced locally was cut very near the coast. Even the quarrying of stone for the fortress at various coastal points, brick-making at Port-Toulouse and Louisbourg, and the rather haphazard mining of a great coal resource, were all conducted close to tidewater. Even though



roads were built, for example, from Louisbourg west to East Bay of Lake Bras-D'Or, and although that "lake" provided a superb interior system of communication, the vast area of the island away from the fishing coasts was all but completely ignored. The products it might have provided, notably food crops, livestock, and lumber, were obtained relatively easily and in quantity from Acadia and New England, especially the latter. If the circumstances of New England and Canada in the amount of supplies available had been reversed; had the St. Lawrence allowed year-round navigation; and had France been able to build its own effective triangular trading system, the total result might only have been that Canada would have replaced New England in the decisive role. Had neither New England nor Canada served this function, two possibilities remain: the attempt to maintain Cape Breton might have failed, or a much fuller settlement and exploitation of the island's resources might have taken place. In reality, after the final French removal after 1758 and the levelling of the great fortress, the enduring marks of French occupation proved slight. There are large pockets of French-speaking settlers in the island today, especially on the southern and western coasts, but they represent chiefly the descendants of post-conquest Acadian refugees from the mainland. Isle St.-Jean, or St.-Pierre and Miquelon, rather than an inheritance from the French regime on Cape Breton itself. With the fall of Louisbourg, France disappeared from the scene and left so scanty a legacy from nearly half a century of occupation as to make clear that Cape Breton Island was largely undeveloped in the 1713-58 period. The conclusion seems inescapable that this lack of development can be attributed most largely to the paradoxical role of New England as the chief support of that island and its fortress which seemed to pose a constant and serious threat to her own well-being and safety. This article, a slightly edited version incorporating only a few of the footnotes, first appeared in *The Canadian Geographer*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1965. Our thanks to HeTen Rowland, Exec. Secretary, The Canadian Association of Geographers, for arranging for reprint permission. SUGGESTED FURTHER READING; J.S. MacLennan, *LOUISBOURG FROM ITS FOUNDATION TO ITS FALL*; H.A. Innis, "Cape Breton and the French Regime," *Trans. Royal Society of Can.*, 3rd ser., XXIX, sec. II (1935); and Andrew Hill Clark's excellent and very readable *ACADIA; THE GEOGRAPHY OF EARLY NOVA SCOTIA TO 1760*.