



# SEARCHING FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES ON ODERIN ISLAND, NEWFOUNDLAND, CANADA

August 2, 2011 Amanda Crompton Archaeological Prospection, Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011, Post Medieval, Survey Amanda Crompton, archaeologist, Archaeology, British North America, Burin Peninsula, Canada, Captain, Castle Island, cellular telephone, Charlie Lake, Department of Archaeology, electricity, Elizabeth Lake, Fisheries, food, France, French colonial archaeology, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Governor, http, island of Newfoundland, John Murphy, Judicial Event, Kayak, Labrador, Labrador's Provincial Archaeology Office, Lafosse, Lisa Rankin, Madam La Force, Madame La Force, Marc Bolli, Memorial University, Michel Roger Lafosse, Newfoundland, Newfoundland and Labrador, Oderin Island, Placentia Bay, Plaisance, Provincial Archaeology Office, Water, William Taverner

On July 29, 2011, I found myself sitting in a kayak, paddling quietly off of Oderin Island, in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. I couldn't help but marvel at the good fortune that brought me to this beautiful place in the name of doing archaeology.

As a way of explaining how I came to be sitting in a kayak with archaeology gear stowed in the hatches and strapped to every available space on the boat's deck, I suppose I ought to backtrack a little.

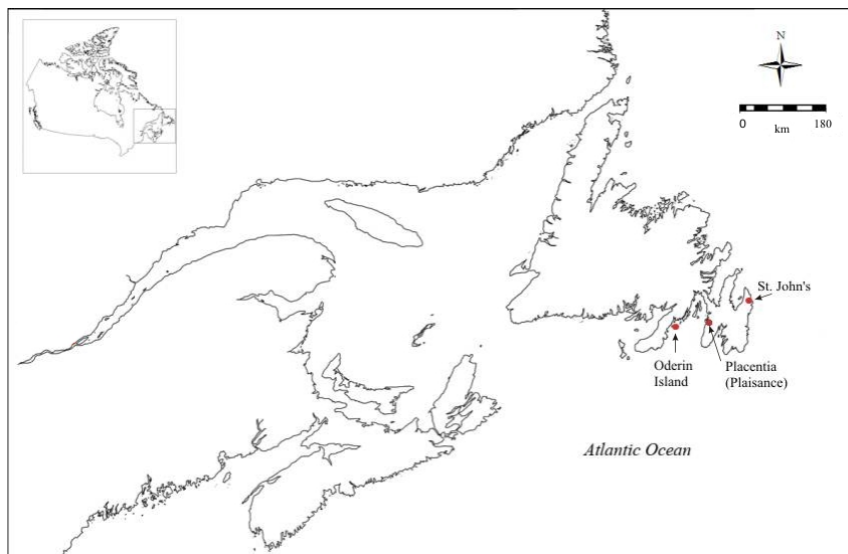


*This was how I started my day as an archaeologist on July 20, 2011: Sitting in a kayak, paddling towards an island, where we would look for previously unknown archaeological sites.*

My name is Amanda Crompton, and I work and study in the [Department of Archaeology](#) at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland. I'm an almost (almost!) completed archaeology PhD candidate, a sometime undergraduate course instructor, and part-time co-ordinator for a [large research project](#). My own research interests revolve around the European presence in Newfoundland—and Europeans have been coming to Newfoundland for a [very long time](#)—which means there's lots of different kinds of archaeology to do in Newfoundland.

I'm particularly interested in the French presence in Newfoundland. The French have a long history in Newfoundland; since the early sixteenth century, French fishing ships sailed across the Atlantic to catch, process and dry codfish on Newfoundland's shores. This was a seasonal venture for a long time, so the French didn't live here year round. That all changed in the mid-seventeenth century, the French founded an official colony at Plaisance (now the community of Placentia).

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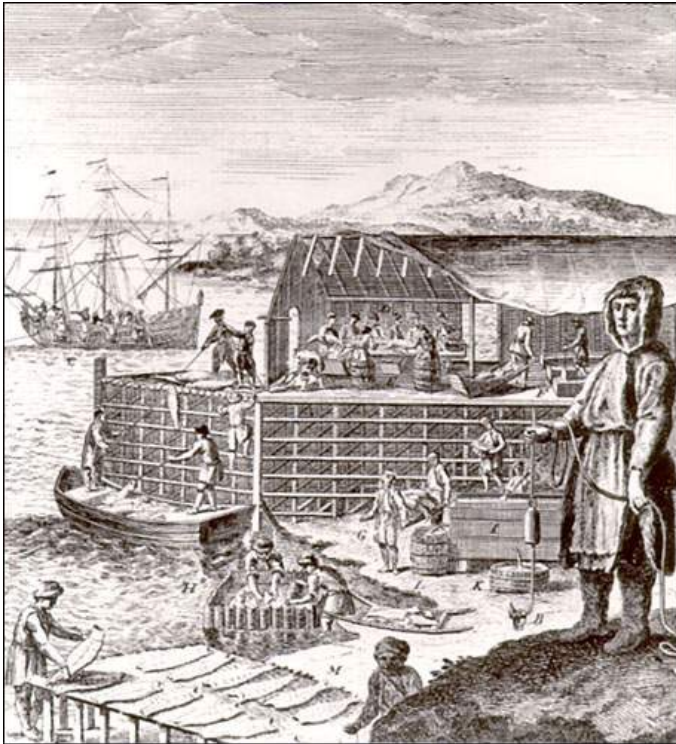
*Map showing the location of Oderin Island, and other places mentioned in the text.*

I was fortunate enough to direct an archaeological project at Placentia that explored the remnants of the colony for four years, and the project [continues on today](#). I'm now interested in the French settlement that occurred outside of the colony—the unofficial settlements that were established in Placentia Bay, on the Burin Peninsula, and off the south coast of the island of Newfoundland.

One of these settlements was established on Oderin Island. We know it as Oderin today, which is an English adaptation of its original French name, Audierne. Oderin is located in western Placentia Bay, about 9 kilometers offshore from the Burin peninsula. The first reference to permanent settlement on the island is by two families, one of whom was the Lafosse family. Only a handful of historic documents mention the Lafosse settlement, and most of those don't contain much detail. This means that most of what we're going to learn about the settlement is going to come from archaeology. Still, what we know of the Lafosse family from these documents is fascinating, and their story was one of the main reasons behind my decision to do archaeology

on Oderin Island. I think their story would make a fantastic movie, actually. It's a complicated story, which means it's a long one, so bear with me.

The earliest reference to the Lafosse settlement dates to 1704, but I'd bet that they lived on the island for a while before that. The family (consisting of husband, wife, three daughters and one son) lived on the island, with their 25 fishing servants who caught, processed and dried codfish during the fishing season. Lafosse had constructed a small fortification on a nearby island to protect his home and fishing plantation. It probably wasn't much more than a small cannon emplacement, but it was equipped with five small-caliber cannon. This was not a typical thing for fishing settlement owners to do, and it certainly worried the French governor at the colony of Plaisance, located some 12 leagues away. The governor worried that enemy English ships could capture the cannon, and use them against the colony, so he sent his soldiers to remove the cannon in 1711.



A historic depiction of a French cod-fishing shore station, where the fish were processed and dried. Image from: [http://www.heritage.nf.ca/exploration/more\\_than\\_a\\_fishery\\_500.html](http://www.heritage.nf.ca/exploration/more_than_a_fishery_500.html)

At some point, Lafosse becomes entangled in debt, and signs on board a ship to seek his fortune—my guess is that he signed on as crew on privateering ship. Lafosse leaves his wife and children behind on Oderin in 1711. The next we hear of Lafosse is in a letter written by the governor of Plaisance's correspondence: he writes that Lafosse had been arrested in Acadia, for having turned traitor and agreeing to side with the English. Lafosse is put on a ship bound for Plaisance to stand trial, but managed to escape (it seems with the collusion, or at least willful ignorance, of the ship's captain). Lafosse was never heard from again.

The governor of Plaisance was very, very angry with this development, and he furiously wrote that he was determined to send soldiers to Oderin and send Lafosse's wife and children back to St. Malo in France. However, the next year brought the [Treaty of Utrecht](#) (1713), under the terms of which Plaisance and other French habitations in Newfoundland were given to the English, and the French were forced to evacuate Newfoundland.

Once the English took over, authorities engaged [William Taverner](#) to survey their newly-acquired territory. They wanted to know where natural resources, safe harbours and navigational hazards were, and because it had been a French-controlled region for so long, they weren't familiar with the area. Taverner [visited Oderin Island](#), and noted that living on the island is "one Madam La Force a French woman whose husband has left her". He also noted that Madame La Force (undoubtedly Lafosse's wife) had a very fine plantation, a large beach for drying codfish on, a productive garden, and a strong fort built on a little island. Clearly, the French governor of Plaisance had not managed to send her home, and in order to stay on at Oderin after the French deportation, she would have had to swear an oath of loyalty to the English Crown.

With a story like that, how could I not want to go looking for Madame La Force's plantation? I knew that it should be along the north coast of the island, which had a lovely large cobblestone beach, and a small island offshore suspiciously named 'Castle Island'.



Thanks to funding provided by the Government of Newfoundland and

*An aerial photograph of Oderin Island, showing the likely location of the Lafosse plantation. Note the large beach and island just offshore.*

Labrador's [Provincial Archaeology Office](#), I had a chance to go looking for the plantation. I found a willing volunteer to accompany me, and we began to make plans for our Oderin adventure. We arranged to rent a cabin on the island and to hitch a ride out on a fishing boat.

Today, Oderin is a [resettled](#) community, which means that during the 1960's the community was completely moved to a larger centre on the mainland. This means that most of the structures on the island were either abandoned or [floated](#) to a new home. So, there are only about a half-dozen structures left on the island, as the rest have collapsed. We rented one of these, a snug little cabin, and set up our camp there.



*This is the stunning view from our cabin's front deck. You can see the stage (as the wharf-and-shed combination is called in Newfoundland) out over the water, and there's another another cabin in the distance.*

We had to bring everything with us that we needed, including all our food and water for the week, because there isn't any electricity or running water in the cabins on the island. That translated into a lot of gear and supplies, but we found room for everything in the cabin.

One of the things I love about archaeology is that I get the chance to live in some remote settings, and our cabin on Oderin was field living at its best. Fortunately, we did have some scattered mobile phone access, which was great in case of emergency, though the access was spotty at best.

We had to hike to the site from our cabin in Oderin's main harbour, and the fastest way was up and over a hill, which gave us a fabulous view of the site.

After a solid week of digging shovel tests to try and locate the plantation, I can tell you that I think I know where it was.



*View of the area that we surveyed, looking for the Lafosse plantation.*

photographs that much of the area bordering the cobblestone beaches seems to be composed of pretty green meadows, and so you might think there'd be a lot of places to put a house. It's just the opposite, actually: most of those pretty green meadows are actually very boggy ground that never dries out, which make it wet, damp, and in the summer evenings, a breeding ground for insects.



*The probable location of the Lafosse plantation, on or beside the beach in the background of this picture.*

very far, and you only need to navigate sheltered bays and inlets, they're great. They can actually store a fair bit of gear, they don't require gasoline, they don't have motors that can break down, and most importantly, they're small.

You can wiggle them up onto shore in tiny spots that you'd have trouble landing a bigger boat. You do have to pick your day though—these are fair-weather boats only. So July 29<sup>th</sup> dawned fair and wind-still, and it was a perfect day to take them out to survey Castle Island. The island doesn't have a beach that we could run our boats up on, so we had to ease our boats up onto seaweed-covered rocks that border the island's steep cliffs (and were thankful for the kayaks' shallow draft as a result).

We certainly found evidence for a fort on Castle Island, represented by earthworks and a small stone wall. We then paddled over to some nearby islands and found another site as well. It may have an older occupation (though I don't know if it's French), and safe to say with all the beaches and surrounding islands, there's still a lot of work to do in this part of Newfoundland.

I've noticed in my research on French settlement patterns that their houses tended to be built on or right beside cobblestone beaches. These cobblestone beaches were used for processing and drying cod. It doesn't seem to matter that the house location was not in a sheltered place, tucked away behind a hill. Rather, the French seem to have wanted to live right beside their beaches, perhaps as a way of making sure everyone knew who claimed each particular section of cobblestone beach. This area right beside the beach in the photograph below is the only place that we found French artifacts on the site, and believe me: we looked everywhere. We dug a lot of holes in the ground in search of the Lafosse plantation. Though it might look from these

In this case, living on or right beside the cobblestone beach was probably the best option—though I can only imagine how unpleasant a place it must have been, when the winds ripped down this beach during our long Newfoundland winters. Unfortunately, I think that later occupation of the island has disturbed the French site, but we at least have a pretty good idea where it once was.

On July 29<sup>th</sup>, we got into our kayaks and paddled over to Castle Island to go look for the small fort that Lafosse was said to have built. We had originally bought the kayaks for recreational use at home, but I've used them before during archaeological site survey on other projects. If you don't need to travel



*Our kayaks on Castle Island. They can be useful survey vehicles for a small-scale project.*



*Our gear stowed on a boat, leaving Oderin. Hopefully we'll get back there next year...*

I wrote this about twelve hours after arriving home from the field, so I can't tell you much about the artifacts or get into details about

the analysis... because I still have to wash, label, and catalogue the artifacts yet. But, I can tell you that we had a great field season, and I'm very grateful to all the people who helped make it happen. Many thanks to the Provincial Archaeology Office for providing crucial funding, [Dr. Lisa Rankin](#) for accommodating my fieldwork plans, Charlie and Elizabeth Lake for the cabin rental and for their interest in the project, and John Murphy for the ride to Oderin. Enormous thanks also go to my husband Marc Bolli, the energetic volunteer on this project, who never failed to be enthusiastic, and Jasper our amazing archaeology field dog. And now I need to stop typing, finish cleaning the dirt off of the artifacts (and off myself, frankly), and get back to work on those artifacts. Hopefully, I can go back to Oderin and its surrounding islands next year!