

CABIN FEVER: EUROPEAN TRANSHUMANCE IN NORTH AMERICA

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From the mid-17th century to the 1950s, many European settlers of the island of Newfoundland abandoned the sedentism of their home countries in favour of a flexible, seasonal transhumant tradition. While **transhumance** is a term often given by anthropologists to describe with seasonal movement of pastoral people with their livestock between summer and winter pastures, Euro-Newfoundlands did not usually have herd animals. Instead, they migrated between exposed islands and coastal communities where they fished for cod during the summer months and for the winter traveled upwards of a 100 kilometres to their second homes in inner-bay areas and around near-shore lakes and streams. Thus, for anywhere between four to seven months, the European “permanent” seaside communities were abandoned by all except the wealthiest members of the community. Despite being practiced for 300 years by most of the island’s population and generating of what might be thousands of winter house sites, these ephemeral and seasonal cabins have only left a faint trace on the landscape usually defined by a small pile of stones surrounded by a faint scatter of artifacts sometimes located kilometers away from any modern road or community. Because of this, only seven European winter house sites are known archaeologically in Newfoundland.



One of the few known depictions of a winter house from the 1860s (Moreton 1863).



A photograph by Eliot Curwen in 1893 of a tilt in Labrador that followed a similar winter housing tradition.

Over the last two weeks, I and a few committed volunteers have trudged through to one such isolated corner of the island to document two sites that have been found by accident by a local history enthusiast. The sites date to the first half of the nineteenth century, around the same time when the first people were enumerated in the census records for the area and when this semi-migratory tradition was at its peak. Among the hundreds of artifacts recovered from the two sites there are gunflints, musketballs, and pieces of lead shot indicating the importance of hunting during the winter months while the large amount of smoking pipe fragments reveals a common winter time activity. The lack of storage vessels in particular and the small number of ceramics in general points to the reliance on hunted, rather than stored, foods during this time period. A few bones that survived Newfoundland's acidic soils might help shed light on the winter diet of the people with future analysis.



Melissa holding forth a complete nineteenth century pipe bowl she found (photograph by the author).



All of the rocks pulled out during a four-day excavation of one of the sites (photograph by the author).

Additionally, the positions of most artifacts was recorded with a total station and by mapping this data the distribution of nails and other artifacts might shed light to the structure and spatial arrangement of these buildings. In the meantime, the partial excavation of the stone collapses identified them as stone backing behind open-pit hearths of the cabins. The presence of a thin black, organic layer with lots of charcoal suggests extensive fuel consumption at these sites. From the few oral and documentary accounts on the tradition, it is known that the surrounding trees were extensively harvested during these months as a constant supply of lumber was needed for fuel and the construction of boats, barrels, staves, furniture, and other items. Finally, the excavations revealed the significant amount of time invested into their construction. At one site, a stone base for a wall was identified for what might be an auxiliary storage room, while at the other site, we found evidence for the ground being artificially leveled with 10 to 20 cm cobbles to create a suitable surface for the house.



The rain flooded the streams, making some a bit perilous to cross (photograph by the author).



Rocky fill used to level the area for the house with a remains of the stone hearth back behind it (photograph by the author).

Through the excavations, the crew endured through a long drive, a several kilometer walk, dense roots, heavy rocks, and the glories of Newfoundland summer weather that consisted of rain, fog, wind, bugs, and a sun that gave everyone sunburn in the brief hours that it was out. Despite this, morale was high and the team uncovered some rare, precious data about a widely practiced tradition that challenges our underlying assumptions about European adaptation to the North American environment but is not often acknowledged as a part of the modern Newfoundland identity.

Check out a video of this week's excavation compiled by one of my volunteers, Melissa Wilkie:

https://youtu.be/LcJRS_4Ds9c

CITATIONS

Moreton, J. 1863 *Life and work in Newfoundland Reminiscences of thirteen years spent there*. London: Rivingtons.