

# Archaeology at Anse à Bertrand, Saint-Pierre et Miquelon 2017

Meghann Livingston, Catherine Losier, Mallory Champagne & Maryssa Barras  
 Memorial University of Newfoundland

**S**aint-Pierre et Miquelon (SPM), France’s only overseas territorial collectivity in the North Atlantic today, was once essential to colonial expansion throughout the New World. Saint-Pierre’s sheltered harbour among other advantageous geographic features made this small archipelago off the southern coast of Newfoundland an ideal place for carrying out fishing activities. Our project marks the first long-term historical archaeology endeavour on the islands and previously only two short-term archaeological efforts regarding SPM’s colonial past had been realized (Chaplot 1987; Martinot 2009). Until Summer 2017, the material world of colonial SPM remained unknown but our ongoing investigation at

Anse à Bertrand has allowed us to begin uncovering the historic occupations on these small yet significant French islands.

While the eventful past of SPM has been researched by historians, the main focus of the historiography has been its later history (from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward). We believe this interest is triggered by SPM’s current inhabitants who are descendant from the waves of immigration that followed the islands’ final retrocession to France in 1815. Perhaps another aspect preventing historians from working on SPM’s 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century is a relative lack of resources. Before 1713, the archipelago fell under the stewardship of Plaisance (Placentia, Newfoundland), meaning

Figure 1: An aerial map of Anse à Bertrand outlining survey and excavations conducted during the 2017 field season.

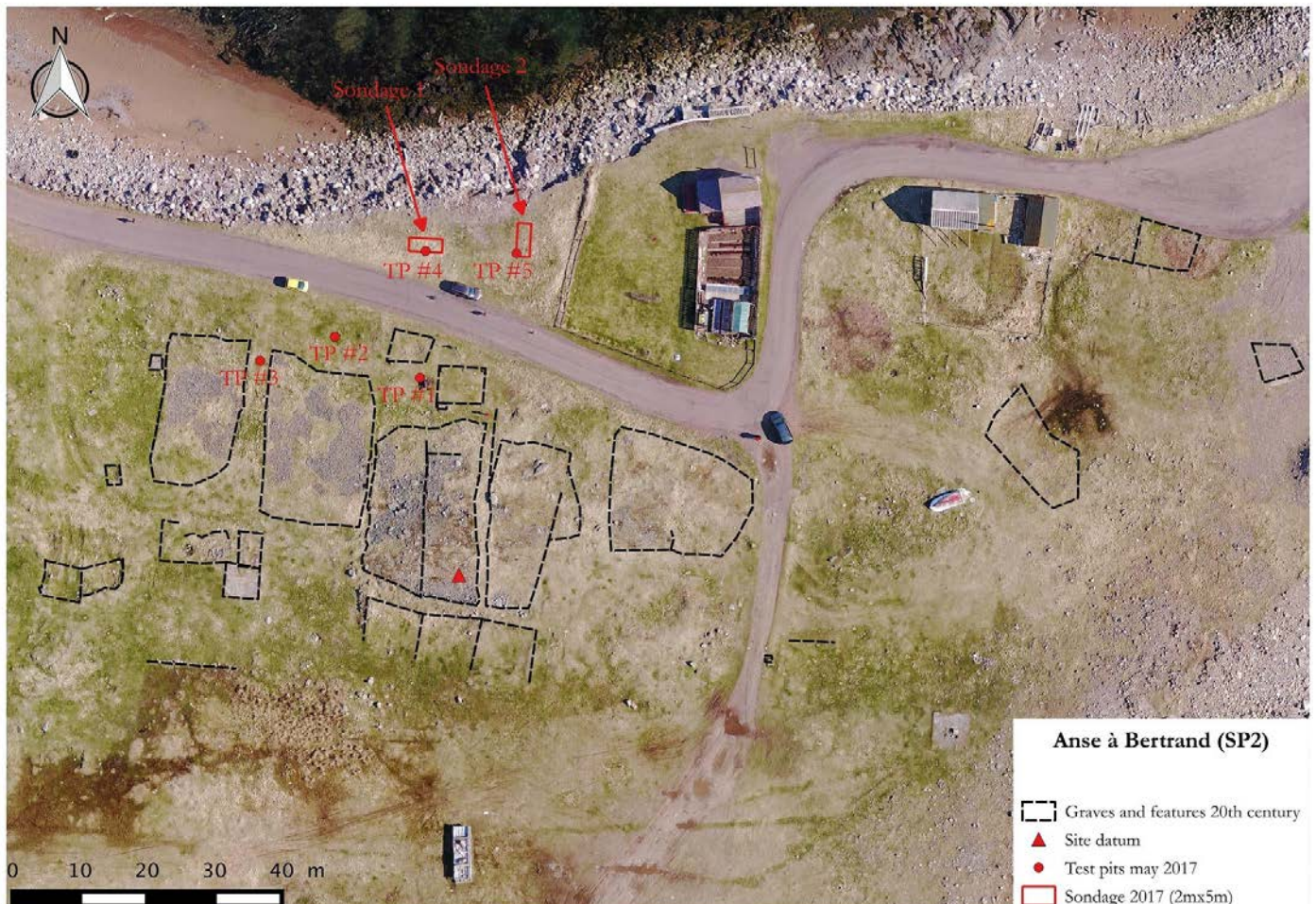






Figure 2: Meghann (purple) and Maryssa (green) excavating small test units at Anse à Bertrand in May 2017.

most of the surviving records pertain to this larger French settlement instead. Moreover, the archipelago fell under British governance several times throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century (significantly from 1713-1763), and French historians interested in SPM have not researched those occupations. Our objectives specifically aim to fill in the gaps of the historiography. Our goal is to better understand the settlements of SPM throughout the colonial era and this includes both its French and British occupations.

In addition to the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of French settlers' final return to SPM, 2016 also significantly marked the beginning of our project. That summer, we travelled to SPM to assess the islands archaeological potential and choose our current study area: Anse à Bertrand (a known fisher's worksite on the southeastern edge of the Saint-Pierre harbour). The 2017 field season began in May with a 3-week survey of the site. The team, Catherine Losier, Meghann Livingston, Maryssa Barras, and Bryn Tapper, took this time to conduct a topographic survey and excavate 5 small (30 x 30 cm) test units. The spring was an opportunity to begin physically identifying archaeological features on the site, establishing an understanding of the

stratigraphy, and a chance to collect a sample of material culture. Test units #4 and #5, located nearest to the coastline, both revealed artefacts dating to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A trench (*sondage*) was later placed along each of these units during the summer excavations and the topographic points taken were added to our GIS heritage database to help interpret historic maps and inform future excavations at the site. This preliminary geospatial analysis is equally important to our subsurface investigation due to the ever-changing nature of the SPM landscape. We use GIS to pinpoint archaeological resources threatened by coastal erosion and development and to strategically plan our future archaeological endeavours.

The summer excavations took place under one of Memorial University's Department of Archaeology 2017 Field Schools. A team of 10 students, and lab assistant Mallory Champagne accompanied Catherine and Meghann on this month-long dig. As this was the first year of excavation, two 2 x 5 m trenches were dug as a means to further assess the stratigraphy and begin documenting the historic occupations present at the site. Three distinct periods of occupation were detected: 18<sup>th</sup> century; 19<sup>th</sup> century; and 20<sup>th</sup>

century. These periods are not only associated with major geopolitical events that took place on the archipelago, but with major shifts in cod fishing practices over these centuries as well.

From the historiography, it is known the fisheries during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were run by *armateurs*, and that the islands see a shift from seasonal exploitation to permanent European settlement (La Morandière 1962-66). It is however, unclear whether or not we have evidence of permanent 18<sup>th</sup> century settlement at Anse à Bertrand. We did not find the remains of any heavily built structures, though parts of the *graves* (large areas of stone and cobbles used to dry the fish) that remain intact in Anse à Bertrand’s landscape today could have initially been built during this period. We did find an undisturbed 18<sup>th</sup> century occupation layer, beautifully littered with sherds of stoneware, pipe stems, and honey-coloured gun flints. The team also uncovered a disturbed 18<sup>th</sup> century context, very rich with artefacts. These layers contained primarily French ceramics (e.g. Domfront, Bessin-Cotentin, Saintonge, and green-glazed French coarse earthenware), many pipe stem fragments, gun flints, and flint flakes. Some of the artefacts can be dated to the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century but we are not yet certain if the artefact deposition dates prior to 1713 or after 1763. This material culture overall bares a strong resemblance to that of the Petit Nord (Pope 2008). The objects are strongly associated with a

working environment, not with families or year-round occupation. The hypothesis is also supported by the features identified in Sondage 1, which were very lightly built and likely not suitable for wintering, especially at a site that is so exposed. Even in the later history, Anse à Bertrand never saw year-round occupation due to its harsh environment (Artur de Lizarraga et al 2016).

According to local historians, the *graves* located around the harbour became the property of big *negociants* during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; meaning there is a distinct shift in the organization of the fisheries and a departure from what was happening in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Claireaux 2013). After 1763, it is known that the Southeast point of the harbour becomes the property of Dallair, Bertrand, and Phillibert but after 1816, it seems the *negociants* come to settle there (Claireaux 2013). We found many artefacts dating to this period (e.g. whiteware, glass bottles, and fish hooks) and Sondage 2 contained a 19<sup>th</sup> century rock feature probably associated with the reorganization of activities from this time. The 19<sup>th</sup> century has been the subject of research for French historians and local historians alike. Catherine, Meghann, and Maryssa, also completed a survey of the records available at the local *Musée de L’Arche*, and many records stored there pertain to this period. While the team has a strong understanding of what was happening across the archipelago at this time, further research is going to be

Figure 3: A sample of 18<sup>th</sup> century artefacts collected at Anse à Bertrand in July 2017. (From left) Bessin-Cotentin stoneware, Westerwald stoneware, pipe stem fragments, gunflints, and a French lead customs seal.



required in order to fully understand how the site, Anse à Bertrand, was being used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We are confident a study of SPM's later maps and the upcoming 2018 field season will help us with this task.

The final period of occupation detected at the site was from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We also found many artefacts (e.g. ceramics, cod bones, and even carbon rods (used to power motorized dories)) dating to this time. In Sondage 2, students found where the shoreline had been built up (to combat erosion) in 2000 and Sondage 1 contained the remains of an old *saline* (salt house) dating to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and possibly before (Artur de Lizarraga et al 2016). Buildings such as this were part of the *petit pêcheurs*, so again, evidence of a shift in SPM's organization of fishing activities is present at the site. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the organizational units at Anse à Bertrand were no longer the *armateurs* or the *negociants* but rather families. The artefact assemblage contained nice plates, teaware, and even doll fragments, further demonstrating the "settled" nature of an otherwise seasonally occupied site. Families who were part of the small fisheries would winter in town and move out to smaller areas such as Anse à Bertrand for the duration of each fishing season (Artur de Lizarraga et al 2016). During the 2017 field season, we found the 20<sup>th</sup> century occupation layers were actually very meaningful to the Saint-Pierre community. The public's positive reaction to digging through these modern layers was completely unanticipated and we were able to connect with locals and learn a lot more about the later occupation and use of the site as a result. Some locals, particularly youths, even joined in on our excavations and the team was very pleased to have reached that level of public engagement within the project's first year.

The 2017 field season revealed Anse à Bertrand is a very rich site. In just two 2 x 5 m *sondages*, more than 6,000 artefacts were uncovered. Our investigation remains ongoing and the team is already busy gearing up for the coming 2018 field season. As our excavations continue, we look forward to refining our understanding of the historic occupations at the site as well as further developing our relationship with SPM's contemporary community.

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Martha Drake  
Provincial Archaeologist  
(709) 729-2462  
[mdrake@gov.nl.ca](mailto:mdrake@gov.nl.ca)

John Erwin  
Archaeologist  
(709) 729-5581  
[johnrrwin@gov.nl.ca](mailto:johnrrwin@gov.nl.ca)

Delphina Mercer  
Archaeologist  
(709) 729-4142  
[dhmercet@gov.nl.ca](mailto:dhmercet@gov.nl.ca)

Stephen Hull  
Archaeologist  
(709) 729-0493  
[shull@gov.nl.ca](mailto:shull@gov.nl.ca)