

# Surveying the Little St. Lawrence Whaling Station (CfAu-04), 2024

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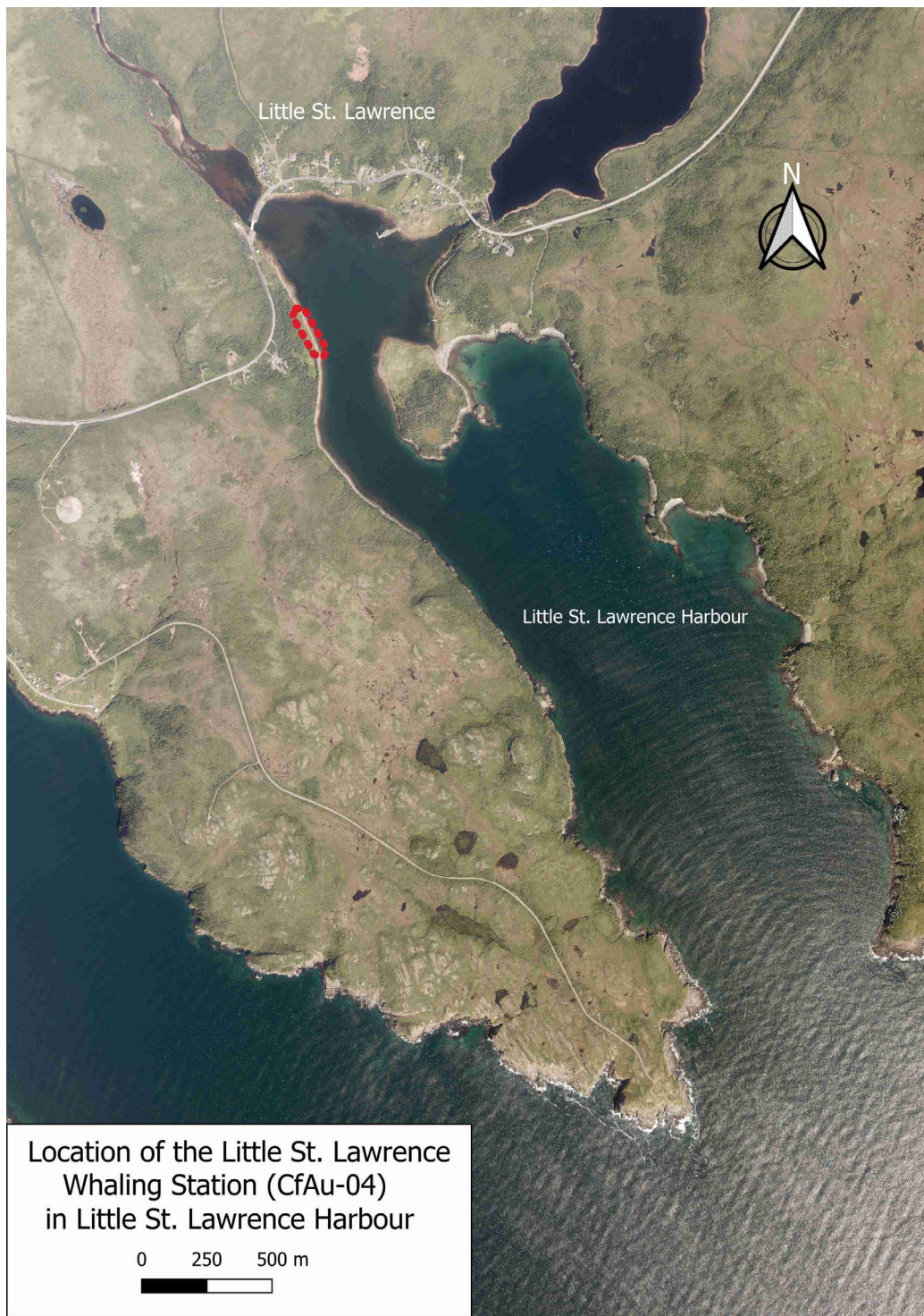
Figure 1: Aerial photograph of the remains of the Little St. Lawrence Whaling Station.

In October 2024, we travelled to the Burin Peninsula to conduct a pedestrian survey of the Little St. Lawrence Whaling Station site (CfAu-04) (Figure 1). This whaling station was significant during the early modern shore-station whaling industry as it was the prototype facility for many patents and processes that would become standards in the whaling industry. Today, there is little physical evidence remaining of the whaling station on the western shore of Little St. Lawrence harbour. The goal of our project is to create a visual reconstruction of the site through mapping (with real-time kinematic

(RTK) and drone photogrammetry) and comparison with historical data (Figures 3 and 4). The whaling station represents a significant chapter in the history of Little St. Lawrence and the development of the modern shore-station whaling industry. Mapping the site offers valuable insights into the organization of the factory's buildings and docks, while contributing to the preservation of archaeological features and enrichment of local historical knowledge.

## **The Little St. Lawrence Whaling Station**

What is known as the “modern” shore-station whaling industry in Newfoundland occurred between



**Location of the Little St. Lawrence Whaling Station (CfAu-04) in Little St. Lawrence Harbour**

**Figure 2: Location of the Little St. Lawrence Whaling Station (CfAu-04) in Little St. Lawrence Harbour.**

1898 and 1972. Through innovations that enhanced whaling practices but further depleted whale stocks, this industry managed to survive despite facing challenges from fluctuating prices of whale oil and declining whale populations. Little St. Lawrence, located

on the east side of the Burin Peninsula, was home to a small yet significant whaling station from 1903 to 1907. Its significance was due to the efforts of Dr. Ludwig Rissmüller, a German-American chemist, who patented a process for manufacturing previously unused parts from whale carcasses into fertilizer. Prior to Dr. Rissmüller's processes, the majority of the harvested whale carcasses were drifted back out to sea, creating pollution and boat traffic problems, notably for local fishermen. Though there were attempts from other whaling companies to reduce waste or create by-products from unused whale parts, it was Dr. Rissmüller's patents that proved the most effective.

The Harvey family, owners of the marine entrepreneurial organization, Harvey and Co. Ltd., brought Dr. Rissmüller to Newfoundland in 1900 where he helped to establish many fertilizer plants at whaling stations around the island. His patents and processes quickly gained recognition in Canada and the United States, eventually becoming mandatory practices for all licensed facilities (Goddard

Sanger 2018:24). This process was employed by the use of large rotary drums that were equipped with crushing tools and screens to break down the materials and to better dry the processed product (Goddard 1993:145). Dr. Rissmüller also created patents for manufacturing and then bleaching the undesirable colour of whale and seal oil, as well as patents for acid-proof processing tanks and a better process for drying and screening meal, which he used in his rotary drum design (Dickinson and Sanger 1993:142-145; Dickinson and Sanger 2018:24).

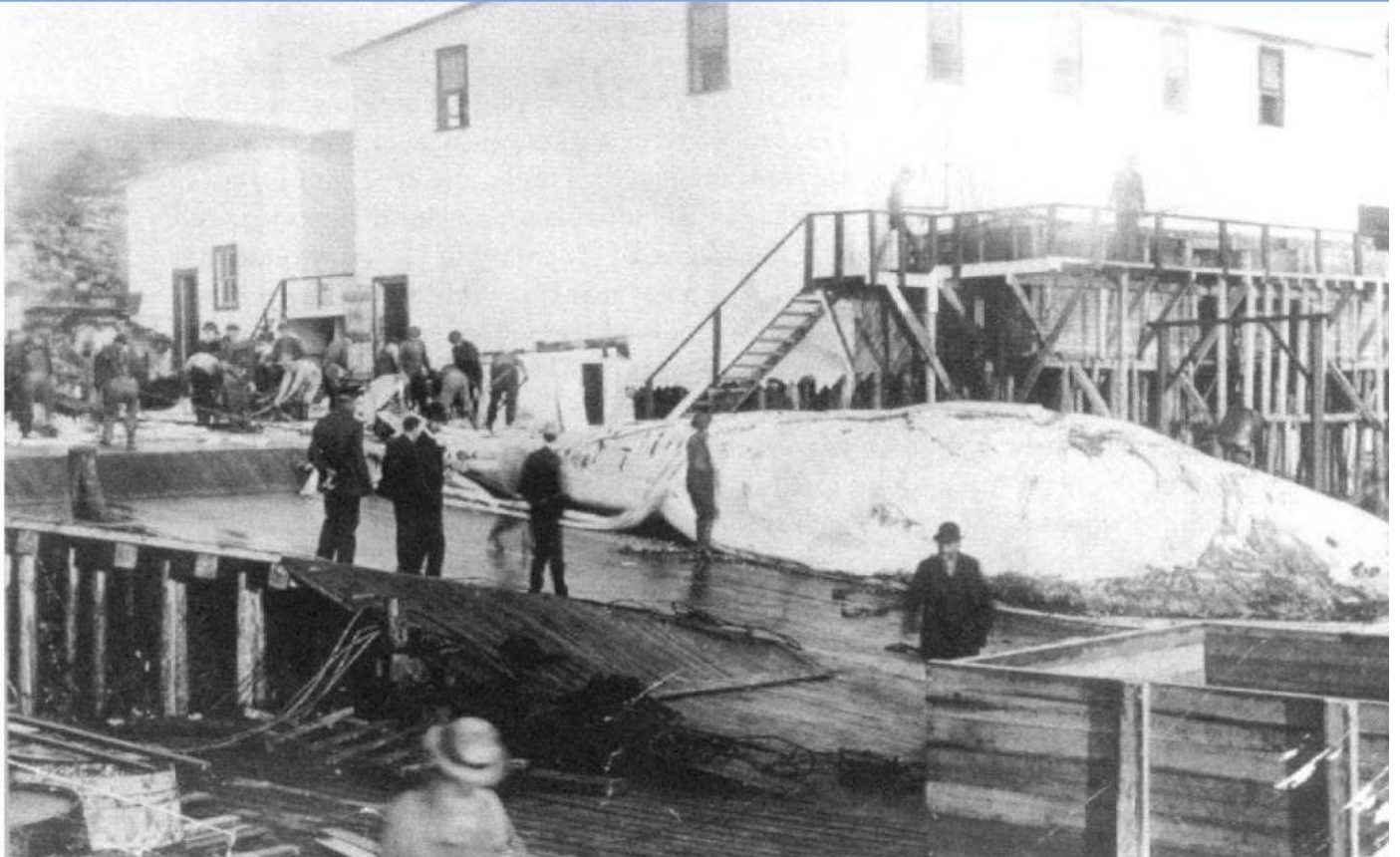
In 1903, Dr. Rissmüller built his own facility in Little St. Lawrence. He intended the “St. Lawrence Whaling Company” to act as a prototype station for his fertilizer processing and expansion efforts (Figure 3). It was at this station that personnel were trained to take over Dr. Rissmüller’s other factories, and the station soon gained a reputation for training experienced personnel who were in demand in the industry that was now dependent on the doctor’s processes. The station was in favour of the locals because of the potential employment opportunities that the facility promised. The company employed the use of two

steamships to hunt whales, the *St. Lawrence*, as well as the *Mic Mac*, renamed *Sebastian* in 1907 (Dickinson and Sanger 2005:113, 2018:97).

The company was given their license to operate in 1903, however, they did not begin hunting until November, which is very late in the season. They managed to catch seven whales in this year which offered plenty of work for the employees and set expectations high for future work and profit. At this time the impact of the shore-based whaling industry on the whale population was evident. By 1902 the Newfoundland Inspector of Fisheries noticed the reduction in whale stock and advised in his report that no further licenses should be granted for a time. This suggestion was disregarded, and in 1904, nineteen licenses were issued from forty-nine applications, and 1275 whales were killed between nineteen stations. This was a significant increase from the 858 whales caught in 1903, but profits were less than anticipated because of the declining price of oil (Goddard 1993:139).

The St. Lawrence Whaling Company contributed 112 whales to this number, their peak year. It

**Figure 3: Flensing a whale at Little St. Lawrence, c. 1906**  
(taken on the wharf close to the water facing northwest). (R. Street in Dickinson and Sanger 2005:58).



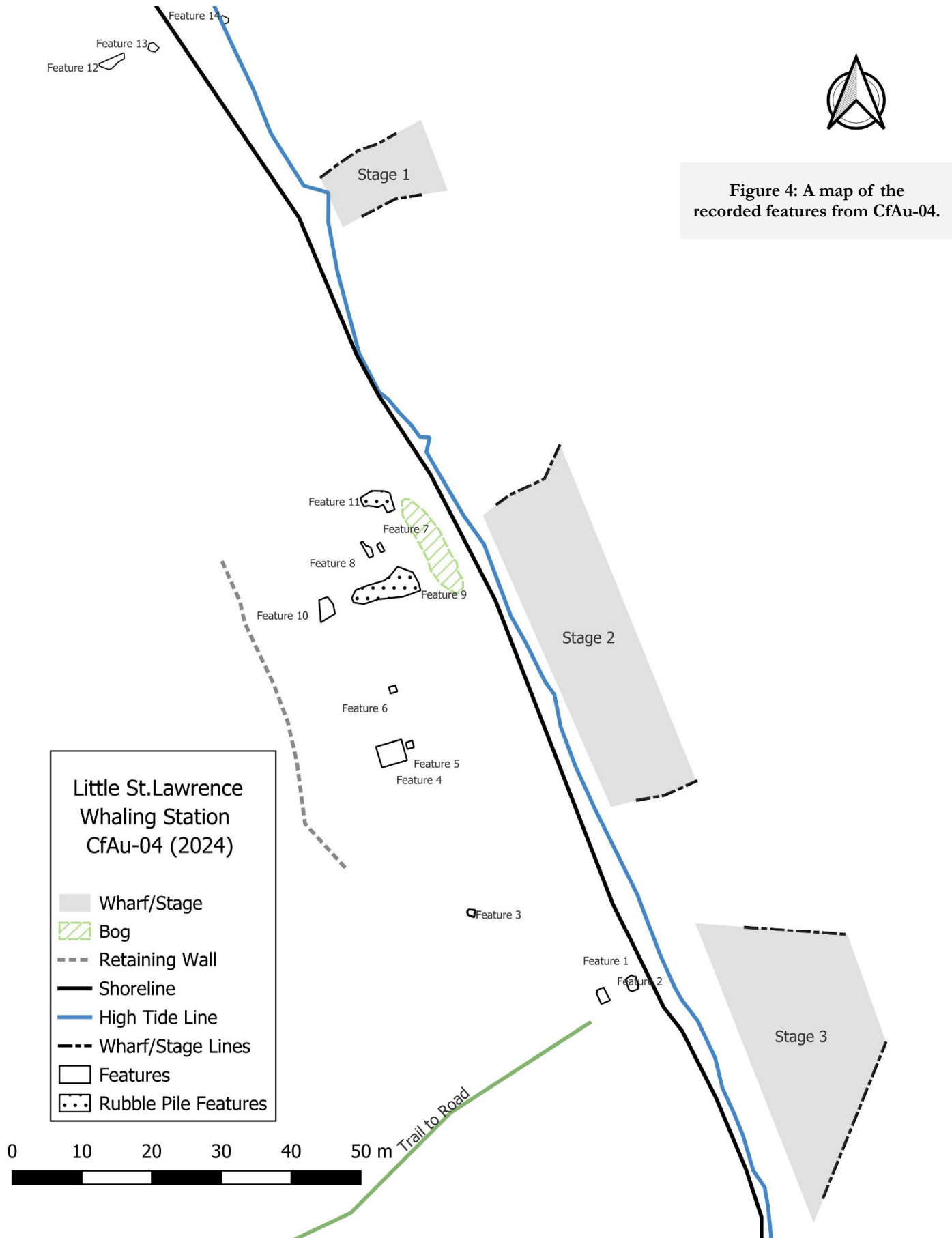


Figure 4: A map of the recorded features from CfAu-04.

was the peak year for the entire 74-year modern shore-station whaling industry, and numbers began to decline severely within the next couple of years, with 892 whales processed in 1905 and 439 processed in 1906 (Dickinson and Sanger 2005:151). Dr. Rissmüller's entry into this industry was very important at this time as he was creating alternative profits from whale by-products. Besides oil and fertilizer, he also ventured into processing glue, canned meat and sausages, which were talked of favourably by the factory workers (Dickinson and Sanger 2005:70-73).

A British naturalist, John Millais, visited the Little St. Lawrence Whaling Station in 1904 and wrote a very entertaining account of his time with the crew aboard the *St. Lawrence*. During his visit, he ventured out with the whaling crew, and they caught a blue whale, an uncommon find even back then. Although Millais provided few details about the whale processing methods used at the station, he spoke highly of the modern, "perfect" factory and praised Dr. Rissmüller, stating that the chemist had "done more for whaling and the use of whale products than any other living man" (Millais 1907:184).

Given that Dr. Rissmüller's processes and patents were essential for operating whaling stations, he held shares in most of the stations in Newfoundland. In addition, his trained personnel were best equipped to run these facilities, therefore he occupied an exceptionally powerful position in the modern shore-station whaling industry. However, as the industry in Newfoundland was declining due to depleted whale stock, Dr. Rissmüller made the move to the Pacific Whaling Company in British Columbia in 1905. Over the next few years, he brought his experienced personnel from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island to operate and train people in the newly built whaling stations there. He also

brought his steamer, *St. Lawrence*, to British Columbia (Goddard 2005:179,183). Dr. Rissmüller liquidated the St. Lawrence Whaling Company in 1907 and severed ties with the Newfoundland whaling industry.

**Archaeological Surveys of the Whaling Station**

In 2006 the Provincial Archaeology Office (PAO) hired Stuart Barnable to conduct a heritage survey on the Burin Peninsula. He recorded this site as a potential whaling station and local reports suggested that it was French or Basque. Members of the PAO followed up on this survey in 2007 and recorded 6-7 badly deteriorated concrete block features that were not related to French or Basque occupation. They referred to Dickinson and Sanger's book, *Twentieth-Century Shore Station Whaling in Newfoundland and Labrador* (2005), reporting that Dr. Ludwig Rissmüller constructed his whaling station in 1903 in Little St. Lawrence and that it was in operation until 1907. The site was given the Borden number ChAu-04 in 2006.

During our pedestrian survey of the site in October 2024, thirteen features were identified (Figure 4). Of these features, eight were concrete blocks. Of these, five were badly deteriorated with pieces of rebar protruding from them, and three were in good condition with either metal loops or bolts

**Figure 5: (Top Left and Right) Badly deteriorated concrete blocks. (Bottom Left and Right) Concrete blocks in good condition.**



embedded in them (Figure 5). We also recorded one rock with a metal loop embedded in it like some found on the concrete features. The badly deteriorated blocks are likely related to the whaling station building foundations while the blocks in good condition are possibly related to other components of the station's operation.

In the northern section of the site, there are 2 flat rubble piles that may be associated with the whaling station docks or the buildings (Figure 4). On the shore directly to the east of this area, there is a buildup of rocks that



**Figure 6: The shoreline and possible location of the docks from the Little St. Lawrence Whaling Station site.**

extend the shoreline further into the water (Figure 6). This feature, as well as the finding of old timber and nails in the water at low tide, indicate that the docks likely extended out into the water. Figure 3 shows a large dock and slipway in front of the station that

corroborates this hypothesis, and that this slipway was the area where whales were flensed.

One interesting feature we found was a large overgrown concrete block with a forged metal fixture connected on the side facing the shore (Feature 7).

**Figure 7: A possible anchoring or mooring fixture made from 7 metal rods held together inside a buried pipe.**



This fixture appeared to be made of 7 steel rods melded together with 2 rods forged at right angles on the sides. These rods seem to be held in place by a metal pipe that is buried in the ground. This fixture lines up with the slipway where the whales were flensed. A winch system was likely used to tow the whale carcasses up the slipway, so it is possible that this fixture acted as an anchor for a winch system.

Along the west boundary of the site in a very overgrown alder thicket, there appeared to be a rock wall made from

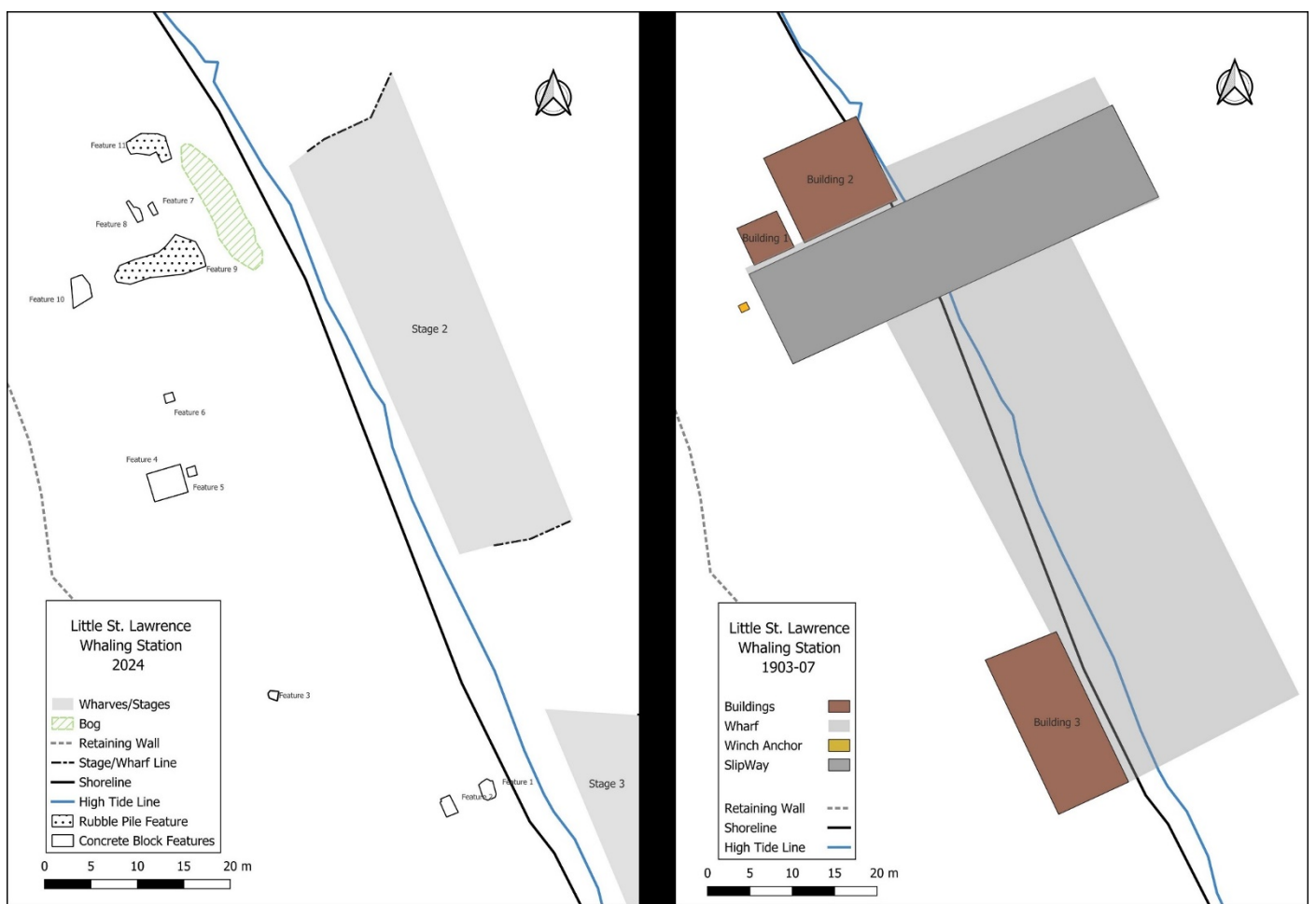


Figure 8: Comparison between CfAu-04 in 2024 and 1903-07.

small boulders. Since this wall was at the base of a very gentle slope and seemed to run parallel to most of the station site, it is likely that this feature was a retaining wall. On the northernmost part of the site, there is a line of rocks with holes bored into them heading towards the direction of the shore (Features 12, 13 and 14 in Figure 4). These may be associated with a more recent context.

Because the company was liquidated in 1907, it is likely that much of the buildings and industrial equipment were sold or brought with Dr. Rissmüller to British Columbia where he relocated in 1905. Since one of the major purposes of the station was to lessen waste, it was not expected that there would be any whale bones at the site. A local source informed us that an artist spent some time decades ago collecting most of the whale bones that were left on the site for sculpture media, and we did not find any during our survey.

### Interpretation

Based on our survey and a comparison of the whaling station in photographs, we were able to identify part of the station’s layout. Figure 8 shows the present-day layout of the site features next to our interpretation of the site layout during the station’s operation. This interpretation is based on the historic photographs and the survey data collected in October 2024 (Figures 3 and 9). There were two buildings immediately to the north of the slipway where the whales were flensed and another building on the southwestern end of the wharf. The company’s steamships were likely moored against the eastern portion of the wharf, and any whales they brought in were likely floated and hauled onto the slipway with a winch.

In the field, we identified three possible staging areas. However, we speculated that stages 2 and 3 were possibly one large wharf. From the photographs (Figures 3 and 9) we could see that this hypothesis was possible and that the wharf area was very large,



**Figure 9: A comparison of the Little St. Lawrence landscape between 1904 and 2024 (Facing south towards Middle Head).**

stretching at least 80 metres southeast to northwest along the shoreline.

The photographs of the station depicted the buildings and the wharf close to the water, but they do not show the industrial equipment that was used in the fertilizer manufacturing process. The concrete foundation features on the western side of the site

at the station site.

may indicate the location of some of this industrial equipment, such as the rotary drums that Dr. Rissmüller patented to process whale parts into fertilizer.

The pedestrian survey of the Little St. Lawrence Whaling Station site has provided a deeper understanding of an important historical location that played an important role in the development of the modern shore-station whaling industry. By comparing RTK mapping data with historical data, we have been able to identify the remnants of the station's buildings and docks, as well as suggest a hypothesis on the organization of the site between 1903 and 1907. Although much of the physical evidence of the whaling station has been lost over time, this project ensures that the legacy of the whaling station and its influence on industrial practices remain documented and accessible for Little St. Lawrence community members. Future work on this project may lead us to focus on the fertilizer manufacturing process and the features associated with this process

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