

WORK THROUGH TIME

Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea



Early Commerce in Isle Madame

Isle Madame Historical Society

Isle Madame is an island nestled between the shelter of mainland Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island. Isle Madame is twenty kilometers wide and fourteen kilometers long. The four main settlements on the island are Arichat, West Arichat, D'Escousse and Petit-de-Grat. With fine harbours and easy access to the profits of the sea, fishing became the primary industry of the Isle Madame area. Many residents on Isle Madame took to the sea as fishermen, merchants or sea captains. The shipping industry made possible a variety of shoreline businesses including local forges, shipyards, processing plants and supply stores.

The Robin Family Business

The Robin family originated from St. Hèliers, Jersey in the Channel Islands, where the eldest of three brothers, Philip was a wealthy fish merchant. In the 1760s, encouraged by the news of the abundant cod fishery in North America, he and younger brothers John and Charles, along with other two family members, the Pipons, formed the Robin, Pison and Company and purchased the forty-five ton brig *Seaflower*, hoping to capitalize on the remains of French fishing establishments near Louisbourg.

Sailing out of Canso, John and Charles discovered a large Southern entrance to a harbour in Chedabucto Bay. It was here, in Arichat Harbour, that Charles found and named Jerseyman's Island, and developed a plan to set up a fishery from that site. Another of their businesses, Robin, Collas and Company, later purchased six fishing vessels to send to Jerseyman's Island. The fleet grew to thirty vessels and many of the French Acadians of Isle Madame today are descendents of the crew members who settled here.

By 1790, the company had relocated easterly to the south side of the harbour on the property owned consecutively by Adam Arsenault, Cyril Boudreau, and now occupied by Greg Boucher. A general store was established to accommodate the needs of fishermen and their families. Unfortunately, the cost of essentials for daily living outweighed their wages so that most employees were constantly in debt to the company. It was no wonder since labourers earned only between 35 and 50 cents for a ten-hour day. Fishermen recruited from Jersey were not permitted to marry

unless their wives stayed in Europe; in such cases men were granted six months leave for every two years of service.

Cod was the species of choice. The firm of Charles Robin purchased cod to be pickled and dried. The fish were then pressed in barrels for easy shipment to the West Indies and South American markets. Ships from Jersey bringing merchandise to Isle Madame would load cargoes of dry fish and set course for these southern markets. In 1903 the Robin store, which had been built in 1795, was floated from the south side of the harbour to the main street of Arichat. This project was under the supervision of Laurence Mury of West Arichat. Manpower and horsepower served the purpose and the job was completed without incident. The building consisted of two wings with the store in the centre. The second story contained clothing and yard goods. The Robin establishment closed out in 1911 and most of the equipment and merchandise was shipped to Chéticamp. When the Robin store finally closed in 1913, it was purchased by Captain Thomas Boudreau and operated by his wife.

In Arichat

Many years after John Robin first landed in Arichat, several business and professional men arrived to make their home there. Among these were Captain Clement Hubert, John Jean Sr. and John Janvrin, all of whom were involved in the fishing industry and operated general stores.

The population steadily increased beyond the first families brought to the area by John Robin. These new settlers were French Huguenots from Jersey in the Channel Islands. Some of the names of these new arrivals, including Beaudrot, Hubert, Jean, Fixott, Gruchy, Dorey, Janvrin, DeCartaret and Robin are still evident in Arichat today. Immigrants from the British Isles also made their way to Arichat.

These British and French Huguenot settlers were predominantly members of the Church of England. The Catholic immigrants of French descent were either refugees from the Fall of Louisbourg or French Acadians who returned to Arichat from St. Pierre et Miquelon after the Expulsion of 1755.

During the booming nineteenth century, when shipping was extremely active, West Arichat and Arichat were thriving communities. The oldest business in Arichat (as of 1980) was LeBrun's I.G.A. Established as "LeBrun's Ltd." in 1863; it was founded by Jean M. LeBrun of Breville, France. John Jean carried on the firm of "Jean, DeCartaret & Levesconte" just west of the LeBrun property. This firm managed a large deep-water wharf directly below their offices and a general merchandise business, which was not an uncommon practice for many early fish dealers. The Donovan family ran three large stores, with one measuring over 80 feet in length! Some other men and women who owned and operated stores in Arichat through the years include Morton S. Binet, Maxime Forest, George J. Andrew, Dave Power, Charles W. Goyetche, Mrs. Julia Benoit, and Captain C.D. Terrio.

It is interesting to note a sample of the prices of common goods in the year 1912: men's tan boots, \$3.00, on sale for \$1.35; women's dongola oxfords, \$1.60, sale price \$1.35; boys', youths', and girls' boots, sale price 95 cents; and twelve yards of the best dress print for \$1.15. Furniture from the Vernon Company of Truro was priced as follows: three-drawer hardwood, mirrored dresser, \$6.75; wash stand with drawer and closet, \$3.00; and princess-style two drawer dresser with oval mirror, \$10.00. A large bag of mixed candy at the Robin, Jones & Whitman store could be bought for five or ten cents. It should be noted that wages at the time were equally low: men earned twenty cents per hour for a ten-hour day at the Portland Fish Packing Company, located just west of the LeNoir Forge in Arichat.

In D'Escousse

In the early 1900s, Jersey Island merchants established businesses at D'Escousse which coincided with the village's flourishing port activities. As a thriving port, D'Escousse faced the shoreline and many of its stores and industries were in close distance to waterfront wharfs. Dry goods such as tea and crackers were shipped in huge barrels that were later opened and re-packaged. Many times the ships were too large to dock and were unloaded onto rowboats which took the cargo ashore. In the winter, ice sheeted the harbour and the cargo was placed on top of the ice. Merchants would have to go out with horse and carts to pick up their goods. In certain cases, merchants would have to get their winter supply in the fall before the ice set in. Merchants such as De Carteret and Levesconte, Morrison and Dunn established stores that employed this method of shipping goods.

At D'Escousse, the firm of W.J. Levesconte operated a salt fish business and a general store. The Levescontes owned many buildings that were used in the processing of salt fish. This salt fish was placed on flakes and dried during the summer months. The fish was then shipped by sailing vessels to the West Indies and South American markets. In more recent years, fish buyers in Halifax would also purchase a percentage of the fish. In addition, the Levescontes operated their own ships and chartered ships from owners on the north side of Isle Madame. With the expansion of the Levesconte firm, a son of William Levesconte, William Jr., opened a fish plant and general store at River Bourgeois. William Levesconte Jr. operated this firm for many years and after his death the business was operated for a few years by his eldest son, Peter Levesconte.

The LeBrun General Store at D'Escousse was established in the early 1900s as a branch of the LeBrun's firm in Arichat. After the death of John LeBrun of Arichat, his son Arthur took over the business. The history of the LeBrun firms goes back over a century when the late John LeBrun came from a settlement along the coast of Normandy in France and settled in Arichat. His early endeavours in business were very humble, but John LeBrun was an efficient and thrifty businessman and his establishment soon grew. With the Arichat firm in D'Escousse these outlets together served the whole of Isle Madame. At the D'Escousse settlement, a great portion of merchandise was delivered to households on the northside of Isle Madame. For

many years the popular James Harely was the stores' deliveryman. On this lot at one time there was a post office, millery and shoe store, ice cream parlour, and a general store.

One interesting store, located near the D'Escousse wharf, was operated by a lady named Carolyn Morrison. In her miniature shop, she sold religious articles such as prayer beads, crosses and medals.

Across from this little shop was the Morrison Grocery Store. All of the flour, sugar, tea, and other dry goods were stored in large barrels along one side of the store and large glass candy dishes were always filled to the top.

The Dunn family owned a dry goods store that was located on top of the hill near the D'Escousse-Rocky Bay intersection. Mrs. Dunn, the wife of William Dunn, the blacksmith, was caretaker of this store which specialized in fine hats and clothes. The hats were wrapped in tissue paper and placed in large painted boxes, a silent testimony to the prosperity that this small community once enjoyed.

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