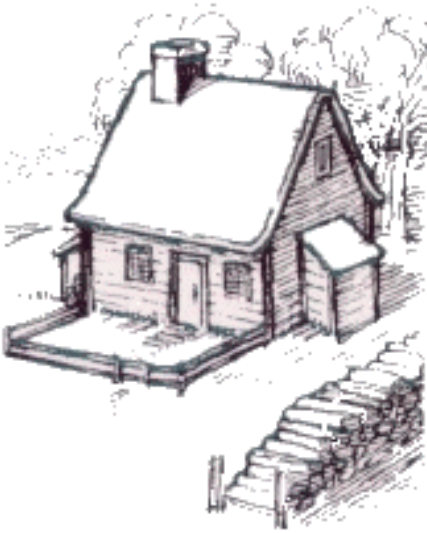


info

Nova Scotia Museum 1747 Summer Street Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3A6, Phone 424-7344

The Acadians 3

The Home



In the summer of 1983 the Nova Scotia Museum sponsored an archaeological dig at a pre-expulsion Acadian farm site at Belleisle in Annapolis County, N.S. Even before they began, the archaeologists knew that this site was promising. A test excavation had been carried out a decade earlier on what appeared to be an old cellar at the edge of the Belleisle marsh. That cellar turned out to be all that remained of an early eighteenth-century Acadian dwelling abandoned since about 1755.

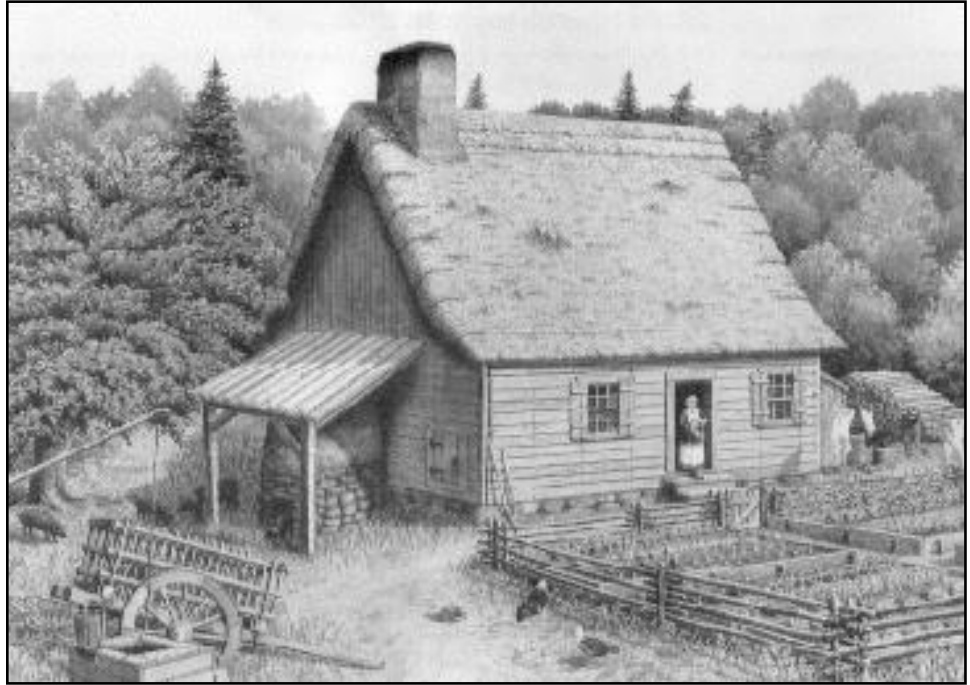
More could be learned about Acadian life from a more thorough investigation of the site. There was so much more to know. For example, what sort of houses had the Acadians lived in at that period? What had their day-to-day lives been like? There were some vague descriptions in documents of the period, but nothing that gave very clear answers to such questions.

The results of the research were very revealing. Of course, it's important to realize that archaeologists seldom excavate entire buildings with all their contents (this was certainly not the case at Belleisle). Archaeologists need to have the sort of skills that one would ordinarily expect of a Sherlock Holmes: they try to build as complete a picture as possible of what happened at a particular place and at a particular time on the basis of whatever clues they are able to dig up.

What clues did the archaeologists discover at Belleisle, and what did the evidence tell them? Certainly the

largest clue they found was a well-preserved house foundation of local field stones, two rows wide and three to four stones high. The outside dimensions of the foundation were 11.5 m by 7.5 m, indicating a somewhat larger single-room house than one might have pictured based on written descriptions of the period.

The heavy foundation suggests the use of large timbers for the frame of the house. Further, although there is no direct evidence of how the walls were constructed, there is plenty of indirect evidence that they were made of wood. For example, the quantities of stone and brick found on the site were not large enough to indicate they were used for walls. But lots of nails were uncovered. These point to the extensive use of wood as a building material.



The other interesting clue suggesting wooden walls was the discovery of large quantities of a kind of walling material made of local clay mixed with marsh hay for strength. One surface of the walling was covered with a white clay slip, giving a plaster-like surface. The other side still retains a wood-grain impression reflecting the application of the clay to a wooden wall.

These clues suggest that the outside walls of the Belleisle house were made of wood and that they were lined on the inside with white-slipped clay. Another interesting implication of all this is that the house would probably have been reasonably bright and pleasant on the inside.

Other building materials discovered included fragmentary pieces of cut and bundled marsh hay, suggesting that this readily-available local material was used to thatch the roof. In addition, pieces of window glass were found, as were iron door hinges and even an extraordinarily well-preserved door lock.

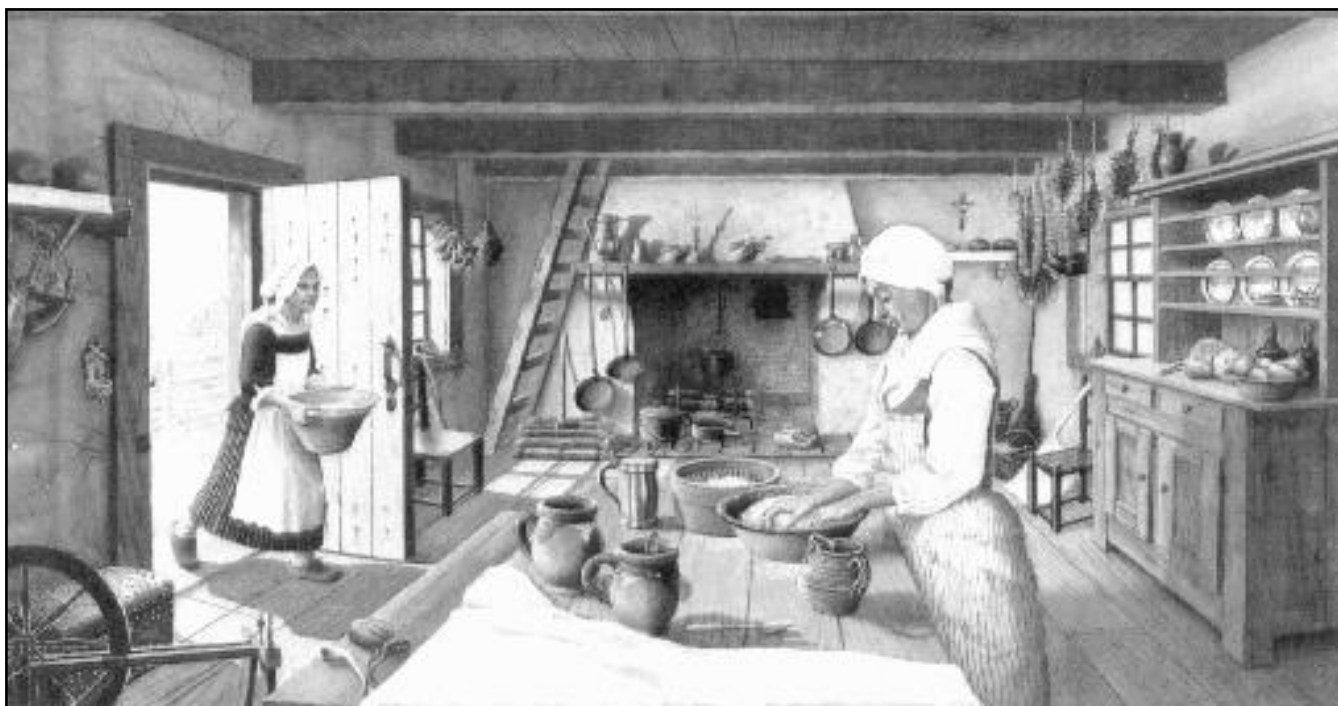
The most distinctive architectural feature discovered at Belleisle was the base of a circular oven and fireplace complex unlike any other found in North America. The base and exterior walls of the oven were made of the same field stones used in the foundation of the house, and it seems to have been lined with clay. The oven door was probably at the back of the fireplace, inside the house.

The fireplace appears to have been lined with rough locally-made bricks. In front of the fireplace opening was a piece of blue slate measuring 30 cm square by 5 cm thick, along with numerous fragments of the same material, suggesting that the hearth may have been tiled with slate.

Such clues, although scanty, provided the archaeologists with a pretty clear picture of what this house

would have looked like. They were able to describe the house so clearly to our Museum artist that he could paint pictures of it. The results of that process are displayed in both of the paintings reproduced in this INFO.

But we were not only interested in what the Acadians' houses looked like. We wanted to discover as much as we could about their lives. We can learn a lot about people's lives by looking at the things they use from day to day. Consider for a moment what plastic grocery bags, Kleenex tissues, computers, Big Mac boxes, shopping centres and disposable diapers reveal about us. We hoped that the things we found at Belleisle would reveal as much about the lives of pre-expulsion Acadians.

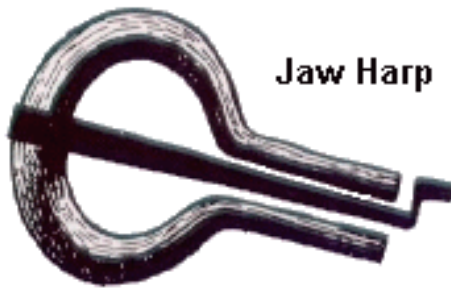


We were in luck. The archaeologists dug up a very rich collection of bits and pieces of things that the people who had lived in this house would have used from day to day. Remember that, most often, archaeologists only find fragments of objects. They seldom find a whole earthenware mixing bowl or an uncorroded table knife. They almost never find any remains of artifacts that decompose, such as things made from wood or other organic materials. Archaeologists have to be patient detectives in search of small clues.

At Belleisle the detectives were rewarded. They found fragments of earthenware mugs, mixing bowls, bottles, plates, storage jars and pitchers, as well as the remains of a cup, a serving dish, a collander and a porringer. They found bits and pieces of stoneware tankards, glass bottles and wineglasses, parts of eleven table knives, three furniture hinges and a drawer pull.

In the class of artifacts relating to clothes, of course, nothing made of cloth or leather survived, but

buckles, buttons, parts of hook-and-eye fasteners, as well as straight pins, needles, awls, a spindle whorl and portions of 5 pairs of scissors were uncovered.



Seven coins were found, the oldest dating to the mid-1670s. Three clasp knives were discovered (the grandparents of our jack-knives). A particularly lovely small glass dove was uncovered which the archaeologists think may have been part of a rosary. In addition, the excavation produced a brass crucifix, a large number of clay tobacco pipes and two little musical instruments called jaw harps.

Finally, the archaeologists found a musket ball, 86 gun flints, parts of three smooth-bored muskets, one file, two rasps (called floats), six fish hooks and a two-tined iron fork for haying.

Some of these objects were made by the Acadians themselves, but most of them were manufactured in England, France, Spain, Germany, Holland or New England and obtained through trade. Once we realize this, it modifies the idea of Acadian communities in the 17th century as being completely cut off from the rest of the world.

Another interesting class of objects collected by the archaeologists was animal bones. All the bones were analysed at the National Museums' Zooarchaeological Identification Centre in Ottawa. Interestingly enough, although there were some bones from wild animals and birds (black bear, fox, snowshoe hare, northern pintail, gadwall and passenger pigeon), almost 96% of the remains were from domestic animals (cows, pigs, sheep and chickens).

Another fascinating fact this analysis revealed was that most of the domestic animal bones seem to have come from the cheaper cuts of meat, suggesting that the choicer cuts were sold or traded for other things needed by the Acadian farmers who lived in this house.

As you can imagine, all the things that the archaeologists dug up at Belleisle have given us a much clearer notion of Acadian life than we ever had before. Much of what we have learned is reflected in the Azor Vienneau paintings that are reproduced in these INFOs and in the film series, Premières terres acadiennes.

We have learned a lot that we didn't know before. But the archaeologists are quick to point out that the farm at Belleisle was only the home of one pre-expulsion Acadian family. Although the excavation has told us a great deal we should not be too quick to generalize from this one example to the whole of Acadia. In other words, the work has just begun.
