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Trepassey's Mystery Fort: A Cautionary Tale in Aerial Prospection or a Forgotten Fortification from Ages Past

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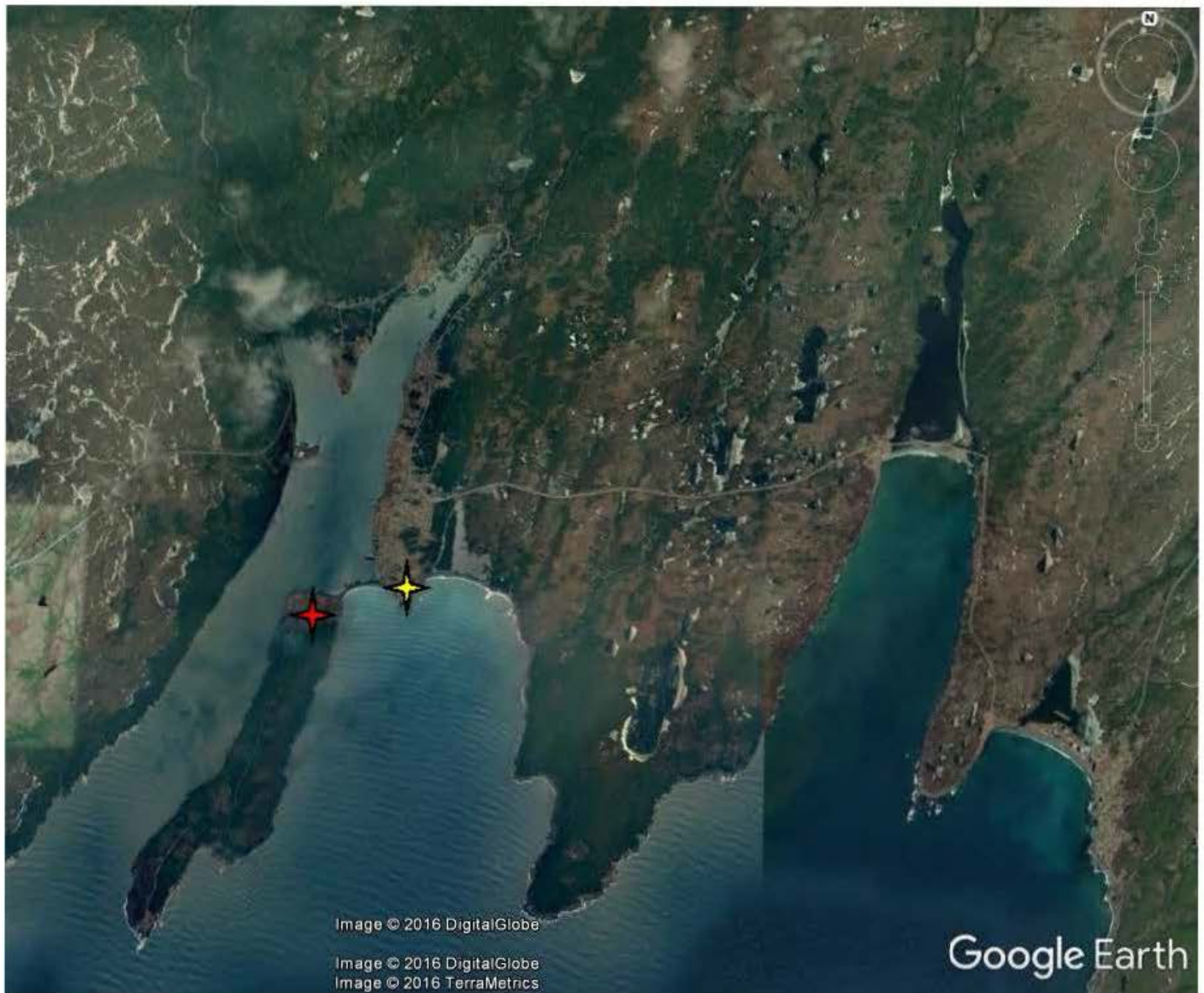


Figure 1. Google Earth photograph showing Trepassey Harbour (left) with Picker's Point at the yellow star and the Trepassey Battery at the red star.

In May of 2016, 16 year old Reilly Pennell was exploring the coastline in his hometown of Trepassey, Newfoundland when he came across a large elevated rectangular mound on a

point of land overlooking Mutton Bay. Known today as Picker's Point, this area is sparsely populated, and for the most part consists of a landscape dominated by old vegetable gardens, root cellars and field-stone



Figure 2. Still picture from drone footage of Picker's Point with some of the cultural landscape features outlined with black lines.

walls (Figure 1). The discovery of this anomalous feature prompted Reilly to get a better perspective using Google Earth, and from the air it was quite massive, measuring approximately 90ft wide by 120ft long (about 27.5m by 36.5m). Riley's interest in military history led him to suspect that this was some form of redoubt — not just due to its shape but also owing to its elevated location on Picker's Point looking out into Mutton Bay.

Drone footage of the site revealed long shadows cast by the straight flanks of this feature which together with its well defined corners suggested it was likely at least partially constructed of stone. Furthermore, at its centre were two terraces or platforms and even possible ditches to the seaward and landward sides. What Reilly first dubbed as "Fort Mutton" did indeed appear from the air as a well-preserved redoubt; not only was it placed with clear lines of sight down the bay, it seemed to have a square trace on the seaward side and demi-bastions on the land front (Figure 2). An informal survey of Trepassey residents failed to turn up any memories of this anthropomorphic mound, nor does this location play a part in the rich local lore of pirates, plunder and epic battles going back 400 years.

When this site was brought to the attention of

the authors, it seemed promising that there could be something of significance on this part of the Avalon Peninsula. The clues were most tantalizing: an obvious cultural feature of considerable size and deliberate construction; located on the outer shoreline of a harbour with connections to some four centuries of French and English exploitation and settlement; yet no documentary evidence or oral history for the construction of a fortification of this magnitude. Without ground proofing, this site held many possibilities. Could it be a sixteenth-century fort built by Basque or Portuguese fishermen who frequented this part of Newfoundland before French and English colonial occupation, but documented little of their activities?

The military origin for this type of raised earthen and stone feature with apparent bastions and defensive ditches was not unprecedented for the western Atlantic. Although we commonly associate round batteries and towers with coastal defense, the square form was applied almost as equally. A number of square towers or redoubts appear on John Smith's 1624 map of Bermuda but even into the nineteenth century, military engineers were debating the relative advantage of square versus round coastal forts. Throughout eastern North America, the square blockhouse, made either entirely of squared logs or



Figure 3. Eighteenth-century Trepassey Battery on Powles Peninsula.

sometimes with a masonry first level, was a ubiquitous defensive form. Demi-bastions were also a common feature for the landward side of coastal defenses since it was here that enfilade fire against an infantry force was deemed so requisite.

At about 90 by 120 feet (27.5m x 36.5m) on a side, when compared to other forts built along the Newfoundland coast and elsewhere along the North American eastern seaboard, this feature seemed to be on the smallish side. However when compared to the mid-eighteenth century York Fort in Chateau Bay, Labrador, which measures no more than 100 feet (30.5m) square with fully formed bastions at each corner, it seemed possible that this was a fort after all.

In addition to the physical evidence of an undocumented, but obvious cultural feature on the shoreline, the rich local lore of Trepassey's turbulent history informed our initial interpretation. Like many harbours in southern and eastern Newfoundland, Trepassey was sometimes caught up in the violent events between European powers exploiting the Island's rich cod stocks. Spain, Portugal, England, France and even the Dutch, all sent ships to catch fish and whales and, in the case of the English and French, also built settlements in many of the harbours from Placentia Bay north and west to Trinity.

One would think that because of its geographical location at the unofficial boundary between the English Shore and the French Shore during the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, Trepassey would have seen many conflicts. However, this was not actually so. The reason can be best explained by

the low-impact the harbour had in the fishery, both strategically and economically. Perhaps it could be said that Trepassey's early beginnings, like many small towns everywhere, has escaped the insightful pen of historical scholarship. The history of the town has been documented to some degree, but most of the research focused on the post-1800 settlement by Irish and English fishers and their families (Nemec 1968, 1974).

In the absence of a thorough evidence-based history of the town of Trepassey, local traditions have filled the gap with colourful tales of violent and fantastic encounters between warring nations, including at least two attacks by pirate fleets. As is sometimes the case with tales and legends, some are rooted in historical fact while others are total fantasy. For example, tradition holds that in the 1620s a pirate fleet, commanded by English buccaneer Sam Westover, plundered the Iberian fishing crews he found in the harbour. There are also stories of two sieges laid on the harbour in the 1660s. In both cases, the inhabitants were able to flee into the wilderness. The English Commodore Sir John Leake raided Trepassey in 1702, engaging a fleet of French warships with his five 50-gun ships-of-the-line. The engagement became known as the "Battle of Trepassey" the result of which saw a glorious victory for the English navy.

Unfortunately, each of these attacks, sieges, routings and glorious victories either did not happen or, in the case of Commodore Leake's attack, were greatly exaggerated. Sam Westover likely never existed or if he did, never made it to Newfoundland.



Figure 4. Pearlware ceramic from Testpit 1.

There were no epic sieges and Leake's warships did take several French ships along the coast of the Avalon Peninsula but his foray into Trepassey was simply to put a couple of French fishing plantations to the torch.

The only documented record for the installation of defensive works in Trepassey came in 1778 and 1779. Fearful of raids by American privateers during the Revolutionary War, in 1778 the principal men of the town petitioned the Crown for munitions for an earthen battery which local residents built at the north end of Powles Peninsula (Figure 3). It was manned by a handful of British artillerymen for about three years, but saw no action and was deactivated in 1783. The Trepassey Battery was tested by Mills in 1993 (Mills 1998).

In July of 2016 the anxious crew of four: Barry Gaulton, Steve Mills, Steve Hull (from the Provincial Archaeology Office) and Reilly Pennell had our first opportunity to investigate "Fort

Mutton." From the ground, the rectangular mound was an impressive sight: the lower platform was 5ft (1.5m) above the surrounding land and the upper platform a further 3ft (1m). Test pitting along the outside wall of the lower platform at the north and west sides discovered, as we suspected, that the outside edge was comprised of a stone wall, but it was a single-faced, dry-laid, retaining wall built using large field stones crudely stacked upon one another. Buried within this "wall" we found the shattered fragments from a hand-painted pearlware bowl dating to the turn of the 19th century (Figures 4-5).

A series of test pits were then dug on the first terrace to better establish a sequence of

construction and occupation. If this was an earthen mound then surely there would be evidence for a thick fill layer capped off by some sort of occupation. We did find fill deposits, but instead of being 1-2m thick, they were no more than 30 to 40cm in depth, and directly below was compacted, iron-stained subsoil. The fill layer largely consisted of a matrix of clay and beach sand similar to that of many Newfoundland gardens. Test pits on the upper, or second plat-



Figure 5. Pearlware punch bowl with decorations similar to sherds from Picker's Point. (source: <http://uncorked.winterthur.org/files/2012/01/1959.0777-cropped.jpg>)



Figure 6. Nineteenth-century merchant's house in Lunenburg Nova Scotia with raised stone-walled gardens.

form, which measured roughly 45 by 60 feet (14m x 18m), produced more structural and domestic artifacts including cut nails with hand wrought heads, fragments of clear window glass, creamware and pearlware tableware fragments, along with a few decorated clay tobacco pipes. Again, compacted subsoil was reached at a depth of just 50cm.

Clearly, this location must have originally consisted of a small knoll or rise in the land upon which the former builders filled, levelled, and retained with stone. Based upon the existing archaeological evidence, the 'mystery fort' at Trepassey is likely one of two things. Our first theory is that this is a late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century domestic residence built upon an elevated piece of land and its grounds delineated by filling, levelling and building a single-faced, retaining wall of field stones.

Similar vernacular expressions can be seen in former merchant's houses and properties throughout the eastern seaboard, though not to the same scale. The town of Lunenburg in Nova Scotia (Figure 6), as

well as both Trinity and Bonavista Bays in Newfoundland provide comparative examples. However, if this platform at Picker's Point was built for domestic use only, the sheer effort required to build, elevate and level the property indicates an occupation by a family of considerable means, perhaps one of the principal men who signed the petition sent to the Crown for protection from American privateers in 1778.

A second possibility is that this is a previously unknown and unrecorded civilian-built redoubt constructed during the American Revolutionary War or War of 1812, when the town's merchants and other residents were bracing themselves for a possible attack from American privateers.

Somewhere in between may lay a third possibility (and thank you to MUN archaeology graduate student Duncan Wil-

liams for this suggestion); it is not inconceivable that a house built on the knoll at Picker's Point was later fortified into a makeshift blockhouse and redoubt sometime during the period 1779 and 1812. Perhaps this was one of the residences the people of Trepassey were hoping to protect and/or retreat to in times of trouble. This theory would, in part, help explain the sheer size of the feature, the presence of many domestic objects and its 'fort-like' appearance from the air.

All things considered, this site could still warrant further investigation. Limited historical and archaeological research has taken place on Trepassey and at roughly 200 years old, the site itself appears to be in a pristine state of preservation. First steps toward a more comprehensive mapping of the site have already taken place. On September 23rd, Dr. Peter Whitridge and graduate student Deirdre Elliott of Memorial University's Department of Archaeology initiated a drone survey using a Phantom 3 Professional drone and Map Pilot software, the results of

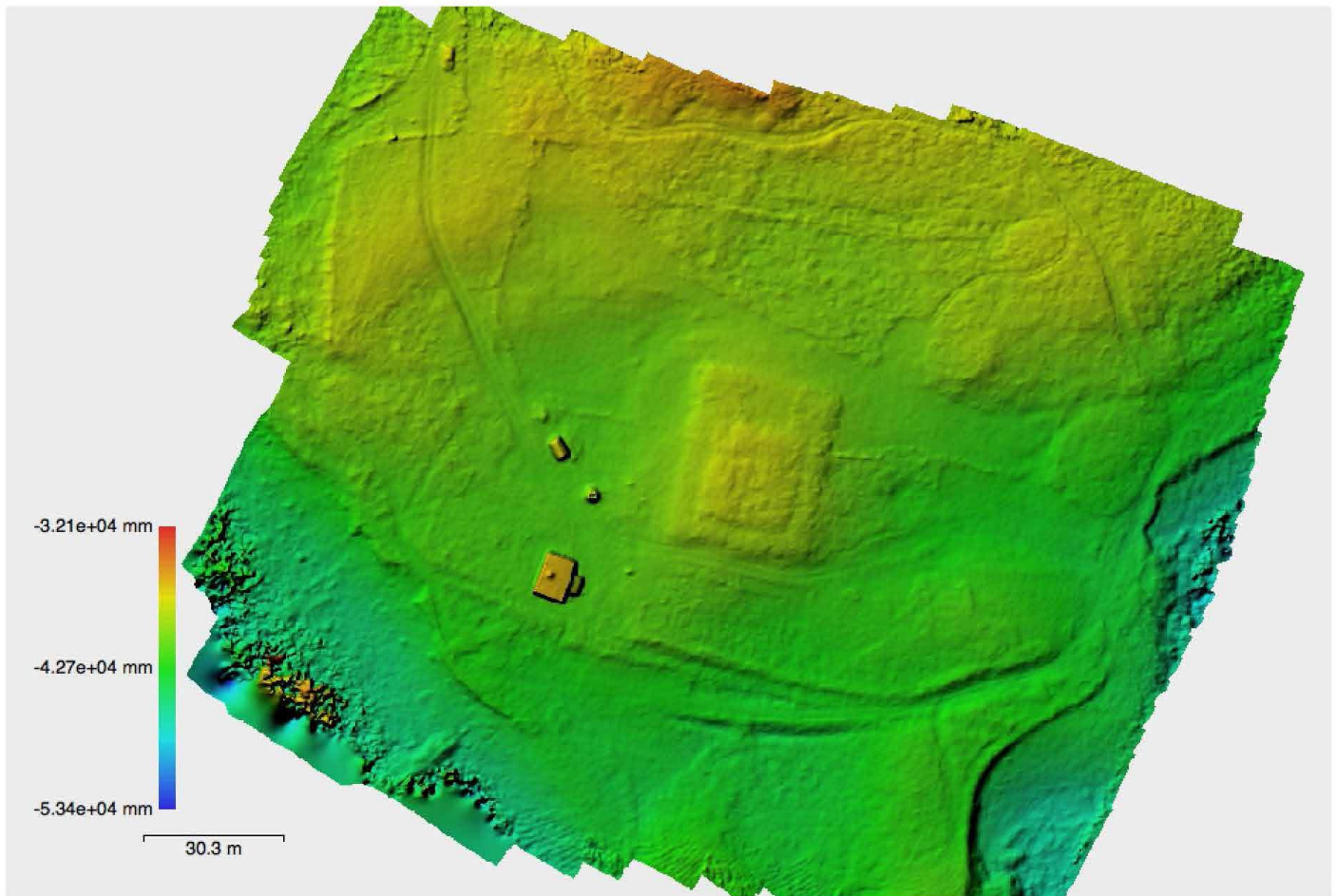


Figure 7. Digital plan of the elevated house and garden feature (center) at Picker's Point. Generated with Map Pilot software taken by a Phantom 3 Professional drone. (Image courtesy of Dr. Peter Whitridge)

which provide a detailed elevation plan as well as further data on other potential features (Figure 7).

To conclude, Trepassey's 'mystery fort' should serve as a cautionary tale in aerial prospection. Identifying, interpreting and even worse — stating to the media — that one has found an important archaeological site from thousands of feet above the Earth without first undertaking systematic historical and archaeological research is nothing short of foolhardy. Space archaeologists take heed! In today's world of sound bites and tweets, we as archaeologists need to choose our words ever so carefully.

Acknowledgments

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