“Thy Reale Friend George Skeffington”: An Archaeological Investigation of 18th-century European Salmon Fishing on the Gander River (Gander River 3: DhAp-01)

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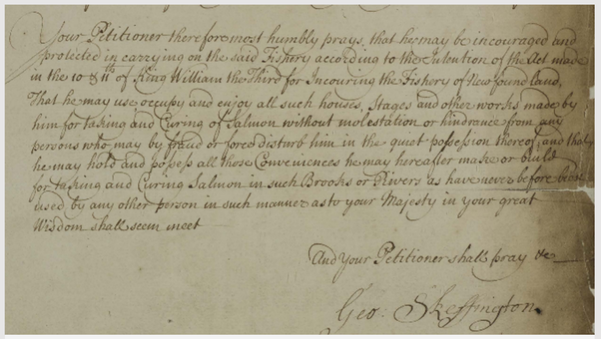
Project Overview & Objectives

This research seeks to illuminate Newfoundland’s historic European 18th-century Atlantic salmon fishery. This early commercial industry is poorly researched and documented in historical and archival records.

Through archaeological & archival investigation of a salmon fishing station on the Gander River operated by George Skeffington in the early 18th-century, I am to answer three research objectives:

1. Gain a better understanding of the historic salmon fishing operations and infrastructure there.
2. Shed light on the daily lives of the seasonal salmon fishing crews who worked there.
3. Compare findings from the previous objectives to contemporaneous European seasonal cod fishing sites in Newfoundland to explore material similarities and differences between the two fishing industries.



Your Petitioner therefore most humbly prays, that he may be incouraged and protected in carrying on the said Fishery according to the Intention of the Act made in the 10th of King William the Third for Incouring the Fishery of New found land, That he may use occupy and enjoy all such houses, Stages and other works made by him for Fishing and Curing of Salmon without molestation or hindrance from any persons who may by force or force disturb him in the quiet possession thereof and that he may build and possess all those Conveniences he may hereafter make or build for Fishing and Curing Salmon in such Brooks or Rivers as have never before been used by any other person in such manner as to your Majesty in your great Wisdom shall seem meet

And your Petitioner shall pray &c

Geo. Skeffington

Fig. 1 George Skeffington’s 1720 petition asking to fish the salmon rivers of Northward Cape Bonavista without disturbance (Skeffington 1720).

Thy Reale Friend, George Skeffington

George Skeffington was an Englishman who settled in Bonavista Bay near the beginning of the 18th-century. Skeffington was one of the first Europeans to establish and operate a commercial salmon fishery in Bonavista Bay in 1705. It is believed that he was the first to have established such an enterprise on the island, rewarding him with the title of “Newfoundland’s salmon fishing pioneer.” Over the next decade, he would become known to have associations with several prominent merchants and salmon operations in the Bonavista Bay region.

By 1718, he was known to have been operating a salmon fishery on the Gander River in Gander Bay, likely in Gander Bay South in an area known as George’s Point. Two years later, he petitioned to monopolize the Bonavista Bay salmon fishery while also revealing he had spent the last decade improving the fishery on several rivers and brooks in the region (Fig. 1). This included forty miles of land cleared of timber, clearing rivers and brooks of rocks and other obstructions, and the construction of infrastructure necessary for the catching and curing of salmon.

Skeffington’s petition was successful, granting him a twenty-one year salmon fishing monopoly over the majority of Bonavista Bay, including Ragged Harbour River, Fresh Water Bay (Gambo River), Gander River and Horwood River, all located between Cape Bonavista and Cape John.

Fig. 2 To the left is “the works,” the largely intact rock fishing weir used to corral and capture large quantities of salmon (Image taken September, 2023).

Summer Houses, Gander River 3 (DhAp-01)

Near the community of Gander Bay South lay the probable remains of George Skeffington’s early 18th-century salmon fishing station. The site, Gander River 3 (DhAp-01), also known as the “Summer Houses,” consists of a terrestrial area on the east bank of the Gander River and a largely intact rock fishing weir, known as “the works” by locals (Fig. 2).

Local oral traditions suggests the weir was originally constructed by Beothuk who speared salmon there until European salmoniers displaced them, took possession of the weir, and reconstructed it. Skeffington had used weirs throughout his fishing enterprise, therefore making it possible that the potential reconstruction of the weir coincides with his Gander River salmon fishing operation.

It is unclear when Skeffington established his Gander River fishery, however, by 1718 it was in operation and was included in his 1720 petitioned fishing rights. In his first year of monopoly, his Gander River fishery produced over five hundred tierces of salmon for markets in the Mediterranean. Over the next few years to follow, Skeffington reported several violent encounters between his fishing crews and the Beothuk, which resulted in fatalities for both parties.

In 1729 he sold the rights to his Bonavista Bay salmon fisheries, including his Gander River operation. It is unknown if George Skeffington remained in Bonavista Bay or returned to England.

Archaeology at the Summer Houses

Previous archaeological work at the Summer Houses is limited. The site was first discovered in 1998 and was subsequently visited by the PAO who carried out a small-scale excavation, retrieving a collection of over three hundred artifacts of European manufacture. Included in the collection were metal tools and hardware, lead fishing weights, clay tobacco pipes, and a small collection of ceramics.

In 2020, the PAO re-visited the site and a small collection of historic artifacts of European manufacture, similar in contents to the 1998 collection were collected. A year later, a preliminary artifact analysis of the 1998 collection was completed in 2020 as part of an undergraduate honours thesis.

Both 1998 and 2020 visits by the PAO documented that the site is frequently disturbed by varying degrees of erosion and human activity. The latter of which includes amateur metal detectorists, hunters and fishermen, logging activities, and cabin construction.

Field Work Summary

In 2023, a series of invasive and non-invasive surveying techniques were carried out at the Summer Houses in attempt to answer the three research objectives. Due to the extreme overgrowth of trees and other dense vegetation, only the clearings were able to be surveyed and subsequently tested.

Work began with foot surveys of the site and riverbank to collect any surface finds and locate the low mound features. A metal detector was then used to survey the site and a pin flag was placed in the ground at every hit which was then recorded with Real-Time Kinematics (RTK). Approximately 300 metal detectors hits were mapped with the RTK, this will allow for a map to be produced of the dispersal of metal artifacts at the Summer Houses.

Field Work Results

Seven test pits were dug containing rich deposits of historic European manufactured artifacts. 182 artifacts were collected from these. An eighth test pit was dug and was extraordinarily rich, it was extended into a small trench and produced an additional 108 artifacts of the same nature. The trench contained a dozen rolled lead fishing net weights, perhaps indicating the location where these may have been stored or manufactured (Fig. 3).

The collection consisted of fragmented faunal remains, fragmented clay tobacco pipes and pipe bowls, bottle glass, ceramics, a collection of lead shot, many rolled lead fishing net weights, cooking pot fragments, tableware, part of an iron animal trap, and an extensive collection of iron nails - none of which appear to be modified. Similar to the 1998 and 2020 collections, no Beothuk archaeological evidence at the Summer Houses was discovered.

Fig. 3 In situ rolled lead fishing net weights and two iron axe heads.

Preliminary Results

The first research objective can not be answered as it was dependent on locating and uncovering buried structural remains at the site. Despite locating several low mounds, the various surveying methods deployed did not result in finding any structural features in the areas accessible for surveying.

Answering the second research objective required analysis of the existing material culture assemblage and the new collection. Over 500 items of European manufacture have been recovered from the Summer Houses thus far. The collection demonstrates an industrial working site as evidenced by the diversity of hardwares, tools, and work items. A degree of leisure is also shown through the collection of clay pipes, glass and ceramic containers, cooking and dining wares, and personal items. It is difficult to make conclusions based on the collection as to what the fishing crews were doing in their spare time, beyond sustaining themselves and their habits.

Based on preliminary analyses, the the Summer Houses assemblage is similar in content to the vast assemblage from the Dos de Cheval (EfAx-09) site, a contemporaneous European seasonal cod fishing site in Newfoundland. Although the Dos de Cheval collection is much larger, the same variety of items were uncovered, including: glass, ceramics, clay pipes, hardwares and tools, and some personal items.

A significant difference is that the Dos de Cheval contains items of devotion, french coins, and even apparel items. Perhaps future work at the Summer Houses may uncover similar items. Research at Dos de Cheval has also provided insight into the food ways and infrastructure at the seasonal cod fishing station, evidence for both of which have yet to be uncovered at the Summer Houses.

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