

SOD HOUSE ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE SEAL ISLANDS AREA, 2012

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In the midst of federal government work-force cutbacks, which began in May, I unexpectedly received permission from Parks Canada to take research leave. Even though cutbacks had turned life quite upside-down, I decided to grab that painter, as it were, and take advantage of an unexpected opportunity. With Amanda Crompton's (MUN) help I was able to mobilize field gear relatively quickly; with Eva and Art Luther (St. Lewis, Labrador) I had two intrepid excavators and one boat driver at the eleventh hour; with Evie Plaice's (UNB) help I had another fine fieldworker, Will McGrath, who was able to drop everything at a moment's notice and come to Labrador; and with Nunatukavut River Guardian George Morris's (Port Hope Simpson) support the logistics of several long-distance travel components came together. When MUN was unable to release my CURA funds due to the last-minute nature of the project, I just kept a tight hold of that painter and funded the entire project out of my own pocket! (Eventually reimbursed in the autumn).

This was my fourth field season as part of the "Understanding the Past to Build the Future" CURA project. Our multi-disciplinary team has been compiling a history of Inuit settlement on the southern Labrador coast and work to date can be viewed at <http://www.mun.ca/labmetis/index.html>. Parks Canada has also supported my participation throughout by granting a few weeks of field leave each year.

This year's research extended beyond St. Michael's Bay where I've been since 2009, to the complex cluster of islands around Seal Islands and Frenchman's Run. The intention was to check on sod house sites recorded there during my 1992 survey. A boatload of stories could be told about this year's project, each of which involves wind, fog, and feeling

quite lost in this seascape of island clusters with not another living soul about. It was windy nearly every day and we were quite literally holding on to painters from the start of the field season to the end.

Twenty-nine sod houses and three stone fish-drying bawns were studied. With the exception of remnant sod walls, all structures were substantively different from the Inuit dwellings tested in St. Lewis Inlet and St. Michael's Bay in 2009-2011. None of the 2012 sample appears to be of Inuit origin. A combination of artifacts and oral information tied these structures to the late 19th century- 20th century Labrador fishery. Informants also confirmed something that I've suspected about the area, namely that all of the 2012 sod structures were inhabited by Newfoundland/Conception Bay families who returned to "the Labrador" each summer. These data will ultimately be used to develop ways of distinguishing Inuit sod houses from later, seemingly similar structures along this part of the coast. Will and I were also able to complete a small number of interviews related to a history of settlement in Seal Islands and St. Michael's Bay. View the recently launched web site of the 2009-2011 work in St. Michael's Bay at:

www.labradorcura.com/arch/stopp



Figure 1. Sod house at Corbet's Island, 2012 (photo, M. Stopp).

