

Archaeology still digging up gems from history

FIELD NOTES

Throughout our field season of archaeology in St Michael's Bay, we gave a nightly account of the day's activities. This wasn't done in electronic idiom - no blogging, texting, or twittering for us at Triangle, oh no! Instead, we used a medium that everyone has in their home and on their boat by broadcasting over VHF radio.

The first few broadcasts were a little shaky, and thank goodness we didn't yet have many listeners, but by the end we were old hands at speaking into the void, and next year we may even sing a few songs. What a pleasure it was to hear responding clicks and thank-yous after each evening's Archaeology News from Triangle — they truly made our day.

One evening our broadcast was about the information embodied in a tiny glass bead. Fewer than ten beads were found in the Inuit sod house we were excavating, most of them of the type known as "seed bead," still used in bead work today.

All were of glass and their colours ranged from blue, white, red, to green. At their broadest, these beads bringing together different worlds. In the early 1700s, beads were made by the millions in the glassworks of Venice for the colonial trade and then taken to wherever European ships were going.

European voyagers had long ago recognized that such so-called trinkets could be exchanged with Indigenous peoples everywhere for resources such as furs or fish. Their small number at the St Michael's Bay site reflects the transient nature of trade encounters in the early 1700s.

Although the French were in the Strait of Belle Isle at that time, they were there to fish, and dedicated trade activities with the Inuit were at best a rare sideline. (In

contrast, greater numbers of beads are found at sites dating to the end of the 1700s, when traders such as George Cartwright were stationed on the coast and remained there year-round.)

French archival documents describe how Inuit often pillaged fishing stations in the Strait of Belle Isle for iron and even for small boats. A bead enriches our understanding of that particular aspect of culture contact by linking individuals in a more positive way. It suggests that a French traveller had trade in mind when he left Europe, since beads would be unlikely personal baggage for the average fisherman.

A bead arguably also suggests that a meeting took place with Inuit and, potentially, that there were further meetings, when other European items from our sod house, such as the French pottery dishes, were acquired.

A bead also represents cultural transformation. Presented by Europeans as trinkets of exchange, among the Inuit these beads became valued decorative objects that heralded major changes in women's dress. Skin clothing that formerly was decorated using fur inserts of different colours and textures came to be decorated with bead work by the late 1700s. Multi-strand bead work pendants also became part of Labrador Inuit women's ornamentation. The portraits of the Labrador Inuit women who travelled to England in the late 1700s all show elaborate use of beading. Mikak, Caubvick, and Ickongoque, are all shown wearing long strands of beads

suspended from brass lappets that hung in front of the ears. These appear to have been attached to brass headbands, which had also become part of traditional garb.

Each archaeological artifact holds a multi-layered story and it has the potential to contribute vastly to our understanding of the past. The study of archaeological sites is painstaking and not at all a matter of amassing old things for the delight of it. Archaeological sites in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador are protected by

legislation for a reason - their loss means the loss of our past. In this, the final column for the year, I would remind anyone who has found what they think might be an archaeological site to protect our past by contacting the Provincial Archaeology Office at (709) 729-2462.

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by Marianne Stopp