

**Ken Donovan**

**Forum: Louisbourg Researchers Recall their  
Roles in the Reconstruction of Louisbourg,  
1961-2013**

**Introduction**

In 2013 Parks Canada commemorated the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Louisbourg in 1713 with year-long celebrations. As part of the anniversary, the Old Sydney Society and Parks Canada sponsored an exhibit entitled “Faces of the Reconstruction of Louisbourg: The People Who Made it Happen, 1961-2013.” This exhibit opened at the Centre for Heritage and Science (the Lyceum) in Sydney on 25 June and it will close on 15 January 2014. The exhibit will then be moved to Louisbourg where it will become part of the Parks Canada permanent interpretation at the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site.

To commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site and Cape Breton University sponsored the French Colonial Historical Society annual meeting in June 2013. Louisbourg historians and researchers were invited to submit their recollections of the reconstruction of Louisbourg. This forum resulted from the conference and includes the contributions of Bruce Fry, an archaeologist, and five historians, Brenda Dunn, Christopher Moore, Ken Donovan, Sandy Balcom and John Johnston. Their submissions are presented in chronological order. Some background about the reconstruction of Louisbourg provides necessary context for the recollections by the Louisbourg researchers.<sup>11</sup> This brief introduction is extracted from the exhibit “Faces of the Reconstruction of Louisbourg: The People Who Made it Happen, 1961-2013.” Bruce Fry, Sandy Balcom and Ken Donovan, volunteers at the Old Sydney Society, conceived, researched and wrote the exhibit text for the Faces of Louisbourg exhibit.

**The Fortress of Louisbourg Reconstruction Begins in 1961**

Once a sought-after prize of empires, the fortified town of Louisbourg lay as grass-covered ruins in 1960. Cape Breton’s industrial economy of coal and steel was in crisis or stagnation. To

stimulate the economy, the Government of Canada began North America's largest historical reconstruction. Although expropriations secured the necessary land, families were dislocated. The creation of hundreds of new jobs provided an immediate economic stimulus.

### **Visionaries and Planners**

From its beginnings, the project's visionaries and planners saw the reconstruction as a means to bring history to life. The size of the project, a significant section of the town and fortifications, created a sense of the past. Other key elements included the removal of modern intrusions and a focus on 1744 to portray "A Moment in Time." All elements – buildings, furnishings, costumes – had to support each other in accurately depicting the past.

### **Researchers and Designers**

The research effort was unprecedented: hundreds of period maps and plans, thousands of historic documents and millions of archaeological artifacts, including the impressive masonry ruins of fortification walls and town buildings. The scale of the physical reconstruction – over 60 buildings and two bastions – challenged architects and engineers familiar with modern materials, skills and building codes. Multi-disciplinary teams enabled historians, archaeologists, architects and engineers to resolve problems.

### **Builders**

The reconstruction ultimately encompassed approximately one quarter of the historic town, and recreated two period view-planes – one along the waterfront and one up the main street. To enhance the period atmosphere, builders hid modern utilities and kept 20<sup>th</sup> century intrusions at a distance. They redeveloped little used trades such as stone cutting, timber hewing and iron forging. Some master craftsmen came from afar, but the main work force was local, including unemployed coal miners.

## **Furnishers**

Furnishing the buildings, like constructing them, required the skills, materials and designs of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The initial furnishings program relied on antiques from France but the growth of costumed animation demanded the use of accurate reproductions. Based on documents and the project's extensive archaeological collection, talented craftsmen revived the production of such diverse objects as furniture, ceramics and leather goods

## **Interpreters**

Interpreting Louisbourg's past to visitors takes different forms – exhibits, tour guides, period restaurants, web-sites, tweets – but costumed animation remains the site's hallmark. Skilled interpreters portray the full array of 18<sup>th</sup> century society from humble servants to silk-gowned ladies. Most interpreters come from Cape Breton, some following their parents. They use their local experiences to bring Canada's stirring past to life.

## **Legacy**

The year 2013 has marked three centuries since Louisbourg's founding and over five decades since the reconstruction began. Lessons learned at Louisbourg have influenced a subsequent expansion of historic sites across Canada and gained international recognition for Parks Canada's role in preserving and presenting heritage. Generations of staff have immersed themselves in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and, through their commitment, they have brought the past to life and created an enduring legacy.

## **Bruce Fry: “The Once and Future Fortress”**

The initial interest in reconstructing Louisbourg was socio-economic. A Royal Commission on the coal industry recommended in 1960 that a partial rebuilding of the eighteenth-century French fortified town would help the Atlantic region, particularly Cape Breton, whose coal and steel industries were suffering at the time. A rebuilt Louisbourg would boost tourism and there would be immediate jobs in construction and related

trades. So it was that the federal government gave the go-ahead. In 1961 the project began, undertaken by the National Parks Branch (now Parks Canada). The idea was that it would be completed by 1967 to coincide with Canada's Centennial.

The target date of 1967 epitomized that from the beginning the reconstruction of Louisbourg was a political venture. It had the attention of the highest levels of government as well as the media. A succession of ministers and senior bureaucrats closely monitored progress and made periodic inspections. Governors-general and a prime minister came on ceremonial visits.



*Prime minister Pierre Trudeau, centre, tours the Louisbourg reconstruction site in 1971 with wife, Margaret. Speaking with Trudeau, third from left, was Bruce Fry, senior archaeologist during the reconstruction. John Lunn, superintendent, and Cape Breton cabinet minister, Allan J. MacEachen, are seen the right. Charles Lindsay, archaeologist, and John Fortier, head of research, are on the left.*

As things turned out, however, by 1967 the reconstruction was nowhere near complete. Visitors could see work in progress but not a finished site. By 1969, only the King's Bastion, with its impressive barracks building, chapel and governor's quarters, was open to the public.

The reason for the missing the target date was that rebuilding an eighteenth-century town proved to be far from an or-

dinary construction project. The 1960 Royal Commission report had pointed out that Louisbourg was (and should be) important to the national identity. The government of the day, that of John Diefenbaker, took a remarkably long-term view. It committed to the project on behalf of future generations. With the Colonial Williamsburg Restoration in Virginia as their model, the federal Cabinet proclaimed as its goal: “that the future may learn from the past.” That was to entail an unprecedented research project, unprecedented in Canada at least.

Right from the start there was a resident project manager, but in the early years he had to clear all major decisions with his superior, the chief of the Parks’ engineering division, who was in Ottawa. There were draftsmen on site, but the professional architects were in Ottawa, and none were experienced in restoration work. The research effort was similarly fragmented. A small group of historians, specifically hired for the project, worked in isolation in Ottawa. At the beginning of the reconstruction, the main source of information enabling the engineers to begin design and construction came not from researchers on staff but from a general consultant, Ronald Way, on loan from the government of Ontario on a part-time basis. Way, who had overseen the restoration of Fort Henry, Ontario and created the Fort Henry guard of reenactors, was appointed general consultant to the Louisbourg project and advised on the area to be designated as part of the historic site, including the points of landing, the besiegers’ camps and all related field fortifications. He also advised on the nature of research necessary to meet the objectives of an authentic reconstruction.

As for archaeology, it had a similarly inauspicious start. The Historic Sites division of the National Parks carried out some initial archaeological work at the Royal Battery. But when the archaeologists saw how the engineers disregarded anything but their own priorities and were unconcerned about archaeological remains, they disassociated themselves from the Louisbourg project. That Ottawa-based division would have little input into planning and development for the site for next two decades. To his credit, the general consultant had envisaged and strongly recommended that “A comprehensive research programme in both his-

tory and archaeology is the only basis for an authentic restoration of Louisbourg.” That ideal, however, was far from a reality in the early stages.

The situation improved considerably in 1962 with the appointment of a senior archaeologist. That gave the project someone with experience in historical archaeology and military sites, and who, having worked on contract for the US Park Service, was in contact with all the major practitioners of what was then a young discipline. Yet the researchers on site and in Ottawa quickly came to realize the sheer size of the task before them and the impossibility of meeting the reconstruction schedule in place. They sought to formalize a process whereby historical and archaeological information could first be synthesized and then presented to the engineers as reconstruction recommendations. The engineers, unfamiliar with the depth and intricacy of the research that was needed, were unsympathetic to anything that was going to mean delays.

The project found itself caught between competing views. On the one hand, everyone acknowledged Louisbourg’s historical significance and endorsed the principle of carrying out a thorough, credible job. Yet at the same time, the pressure was on for visible results. Political pressure mounted as the long-term vision became mired in short-term impatience. A story in the *Globe and Mail* (Toronto) noted: “The new battle of Louisbourg... The archaeologists and historians, barricaded behind maps, diaries, rusty cannons and piles of building stone, are defending their position bravely. Their argument is this: Don’t spoil the job to meet a deadline. Without thorough historical research, it won’t be a true reconstruction; it will be a pretentious fake.”

What the researchers asked for was an “ordered dialogue” between disciplines. In that way, research information would play a major role in setting the schedule of the reconstruction. Though some managers in Louisbourg and Ottawa saw such an approach as intransigence on the researchers’ part, it was the philosophy that won out.

At the beginning of 1966, the engineer in charge of the project was moved to one side. A new appointee, a Park Superintendent, was given full responsibility for the reconstruction.

That new manager, John Lunn (1923-2001), represented a major breakthrough. Louisbourg's first superintendent, effectively from 1966 to 1975, Lunn was a decisive leader who directed much of the interpretation of the reconstruction. He moved the research division from Ottawa to Louisbourg and developed multi-disciplinary teams for the project. He was neither an engineer nor a career bureaucrat, but a museologist. Moreover, he had been museum curator of an important Romano-British site in England and understood the complexities of archaeological research and the need to correlate it with historical research. Lunn sought to end the research - reconstruction dichotomy by bringing the researchers into the planning and design process rather than relegating them to the role of information providers at the bottom of the line.

From this point on, all the disciplines were to be located at Louisbourg and research became part of the management structure. The design team was at the heart of the new approach. Rather than a series of separate research reports interpreted and distilled by senior researchers from the respective disciplines, the design team allowed for an exchange of ideas and an inter-disciplinary evaluation of documentary sources and archaeological records. The debates could be noisy and heated and were never boring. All decisions were subjected to intense scrutiny. The interdisciplinary team approach that Louisbourg pioneered eventually became the accepted practice across the entire Parks Canada system whenever there was to be a reconstruction.

Excavation directly related to the reconstruction continued until 1975, by which point a representative array of defensive works, government facilities, private residences and commercial properties had been uncovered. The quantities of artifacts were astonishing, enhanced in many instances by fair to good state of preservation. Because Louisbourg is a low-lying site on a poorly-drained peninsula, many foundations and cellars, wells and privies had been inundated. That meant there were ideal conditions for the preservation of otherwise perishable organic materials such as wood, leather and even cloth.

The archaeological findings, along with the hundreds of thousands of documents, led to an obsession with detail, right

down to the thickness of floor planks and roofing slates. Such details were appreciated by the craftsmen who worked in stone, wood and iron to reproduce buildings and/or make accurate reproductions of artifacts. There were compromises, of course. Where the French had built with poorly setting lime mortar and were constantly plagued with maintenance problems, the reconstruction made no attempt to repeat the method, but used modern Portland cement. Another difference was in the brickwork. No amount of aging will soften the look of mass-produced brick fired to high temperatures. A supply of crumbly and irregular bricks, such as were the originals, did not exist, nor were they desired.

Throughout the construction phase the design team relied on a hierarchy of evidence to support its decisions. The highest level was archaeological “as found” evidence. Next came documentary sources of varying degrees of reliability, with the French engineers’ reports, specifications and plans being at the top. Only when there was no direct evidence for a particular structural element was a “typical” source considered.

Some Louisbourg evidence for one location was sometimes extrapolated to another location, especially for structural elements such as doorways, fireplaces and gun embrasures, and for building hardware and domestic table wares. In the absence of Louisbourg-specific evidence, researchers drew upon comparative material in France and in other French colonies, as well as contemporary documentary sources, published and archival. When the evidence was contradictory, as it sometimes was, the design committee had to weigh its options and put the decision up for a vote. Essentially the same process was adopted for costume design. Those curators worked with specimens from museums and from documents, and strove for accuracy in military uniforms and period dress. Another team assured quality control over suppliers making ceramics, pewter and glass and clay pipes. The reproductions were based on original examples. With attention to detail being the watchword in every regard, Louisbourg may be regarded as an “authentic” reconstruction.

The archaeological contribution was huge, in every sense. Today’s artifact collection numbers about five million artifacts. If one had to select a single term to describe the Louisbourg proj-



ect, it would be “interdependence.” Historians and archaeologists alike took for granted the need to discuss their respective sources of evidence. No excavations on town site properties took place without being preceded by a structural history, and the historian who had prepared the report was frequently in the field to consult with the archaeologist.

Though the concept of cultural resource management (CRM) developed in the United States, the concepts it embodies were actively debated at Louisbourg before the CRM terms existed. Archaeological excavation being by its nature destructive, archaeologists have always had to confront the issue of what to do with the structural remains they have uncovered: stabilize them, use them as a basis for restoring the original intact structure (i.e. reconstruction) or simply rebury them. From the beginning, the Louisbourg project struggled with this issue. Where an engineer untrained in restoration or preservation work might not see much heritage value in ruins, and want the material to be replaced, archaeologists generally disagreed. Within the King’s Bastion, only some of the casemates that had withstood the ravages of siege, demolition and time were to be stabilized and incorporated into the reconstruction. Subsequent to Lunn’s assumption of control, the atmosphere favouring the preservation of original fabric improved somewhat, but the record was spotty at best. Dressed sandstone surrounds to features such as windows, doorways, fireplaces and gun embrasures, as well as quoins at the angles of buildings and fortification walls, were incorporated into the construction only if their condition was sound enough. Otherwise, they survive as oversized archaeological artifacts and as museum objects. Here and there, original cobblestone or brick floors and drains survive, encased in a modern structure, but the fragile nature of most features meant that losses were high. Preservation of original fabric was not an overriding priority for the reconstruction of Louisbourg, especially when measured against requirements of structural soundness and service access.

Predictably, archaeologists advocated preserving as many original features as possible by minimizing damage caused by the installation of lines, conduits and access roads. Their concern was not just for features in the reconstruction zone. Two thirds of the

town site, after all, was outside the developed area. Meanwhile, on the shoreline were many fortification features that were susceptible to erosion. The Princess Demi-Bastion was observed to be losing parts of its walls as early as 1963. The construction managers initially failed to appreciate the irony of spending large amounts to rebuild one part of a National Historic Site while in another part original features were disappearing into the sea. Over time, however, management became more conscious of its cultural resource management (CRM) responsibilities. In 1980, funds were allocated for a barrier in front of the Princess Demi-Bastion, followed soon after by a policy of covering the deteriorating ruins of the hospital. Likewise, the remains of the Royal battery, across the harbour, have been protected against further erosion.

Despite the importance of archaeology in rebuilding Louisbourg, visitors see relatively little of the artifact collections. There are modest exhibits within the King's Bastion barracks and in several houses in the town.

Visitors might also wonder about the variety of interpretive concepts in play at the Fortress. Leaving a shuttle bus outside the walls, they approach the main gate, where guards halt them and challenge them to identify themselves: France is at war and the garrison is wary of English spies. Once inside the town, visitors encounter costumed animators who reinforce the message that they are reliving the summer of 1744. (Early in the reconstruction process a consensus emerged that the place should appear as it was at the height of its growth and prosperity, when the fortifications had recently been completed and had not yet suffered bombardment from the army of New Englanders in 1745.) Yet modern reality inevitably intrudes. A site capable of absorbing thousands of visitors has to make provision for amenities and must comply with contemporary health and safety regulations. The 1744 theme is ignored to provide washrooms, heating and sprinkler systems, and by museum-style exhibits located randomly throughout the site. Some buildings exist only as facades, and are not furnished or open to the public but contain services and equipment needed for daily operations. The illusion is further diluted by supposedly French inhabitants and soldiery speaking English with a resolutely Cape Breton lilt, and by stalwart lasses

in soldiers' uniforms. Interiors are clean and dry, streets and ditches are free of filth and refuse, and the air is no longer redolent with the odour of drying cod. The difficulty, if not the impossibility, of recreating the past through reconstruction and animation is a lesson that Louisbourg will forever be trying to transcend.

While the focus on 1744 simplified construction decisions, it restricted the scope of interpretive messages. The most glaring issue is that an emphasis on a "moment in time" makes it hard to communicate much about those two momentous events of continental and world importance, the sieges of 1745 and 1758. Staff are trying to address that matter.

The concept of reconstruction that gave birth to the Fortress in the 1960s is no longer acceptable to the international heritage community, and is now discouraged in Parks Canada's CRM policy. Economic considerations aside — and they are significant — it is difficult to imagine today that any government would champion a project to rebuild Louisbourg from its rubble as happened in the 1960s.

Now with 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary behind it, Louisbourg looks ahead into an uncertain future. Within a few decades, the peninsula on which the town was built will be partially, if not entirely, inundated by rising sea levels and increased coastal erosion. Eventually, many of its reconstructed buildings will vanish or become unusable. Preservation of Louisbourg's legacy will therefore be achieved through its amassed archaeological and historical information and interpreted through computerized virtual reconstructions. But that can only be achieved through the continuity of the research knowledge and practices that have evolved throughout the years. Louisbourg can still play a major role in telling its stories, but in yet another innovative way.

### **Brenda Dunn: "Work at Louisbourg, 1967-1976"**

In May 1967, one week after my graduation from Acadia University, I began work as a project historian at the Fortress of Louisbourg. At the time, the reconstruction project was not widely known, and apparently no one more qualified than I, with my new B.A., was interested in working in a remote (at least in

Ottawa terms) fishing village in Cape Breton. Thus began the first of three periods of employment in the research section at Louisbourg between 1967 and 1976.

I had never been to Louisbourg. I was familiar with Fort Beausejour and Grand-Pré National Historic Sites and various museums, including the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., from visits with my family. My father had a keen interest in history. Louisbourg became the training ground for my career as an historian with Parks Canada.

I was one of the first “staff historians” to be based at the site. The Louisbourg project’s first historians worked in Ottawa, carrying out research and, in some cases, traveling to Boston, London and Paris to collect and copy archival material relating to eighteenth-century Louisbourg. In 1966, when the research staff and archives moved to Louisbourg, only one historian (Blaine Adams) made the move. Two others were hired, one (Linda Hoad) from Toronto, and another (Pierre Bureau) from Quebec. I had the distinction of being the first Maritimer.

Initially there was a link with earlier days. Ronald Way, who had directed restoration at Fort Henry in Kingston and other sites in Ontario, continued to be our research director and a consultant to the project, as he had in Ottawa. He made periodic trips to Louisbourg, to meet with the park superintendent, John Lunn. (Although I don’t recall meeting him, I do remember being warned to have a tidy desk in case he visited the history floor.) Decisions made during his visits no doubt affected our work in the history section. Katharine McLennan, Louisbourg’s first curator, who had worked with her father, J.S. McLennan, a Cape Breton industrialist and Conservative senator (1853-1939), in the research for his book, *Louisbourg from Its Foundation to Its Fall* (1918), was also an occasional visitor. Then in her late seventies, Katharine had a distinctive, crisp step as she strode down the hall where the historians were located. (J.S. McLennan had played a critical role in Louisbourg becoming a National Historic Site in 1928.)

Historical research at Louisbourg was not a solitary occupation. We worked closely with professionals from a variety of disciplines - archaeologists, archivists, interpreters, engineers, draftsmen, architects, artists, curators, managers and others. Be-

cause our offices were adjacent to the remains of the fortress, our research had an immediacy not usually available to historians. We could visit archaeological excavations and consult with archaeologists on site, as the work was being carried out. We also had the luxury of consulting and sharing information with fellow historians, colleagues who were researching varied aspects of the history of the fortress. Amazingly, most of us were quite young.

In 1967, research was focused on the reconstruction itself. The King's Bastion and its barracks were under construction while the Dauphin Bastion and the King's buildings in Block 1 were being excavated. Attention now switched to the private buildings of the town blocks within the area to be reconstructed. My first report was on the western half of Block 16, which was slated for excavation. My findings were limited, due in part to the fact that, with few finding aids, it was difficult to find information on the people and buildings of Block 16 in Louisbourg's extensive archival collection, especially within a short time frame. When I later did a report on the twelve properties of Block 2, the collective, ongoing work in the archives had made things easier. For example, there was now a parish record file, and a domestic architecture file, compiled by historians and, in the case of the of the parish record file, also by research assistants.

Through ongoing research in documents such as the parish records, we historians developed a great familiarity with the people of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Louisbourg. We exchanged information about them over coffee, gossiping about the significant as well as the small details of their lives. For, in all things, research for the Louisbourg project was about small details as well as the larger picture. Although it may seem strange, we were all saddened when, while helping with the parish record file, we became aware of the many deaths of familiar fortress residents in the smallpox epidemic of the 1730s.

Structural design for the reconstruction of Louisbourg buildings was carried out by an interdisciplinary team. The team consisted of an historian, archaeologist, and drafts person, led by an architect or, in the early days, an engineer. Before the indomitable and talented Yvon Le Blanc came to Louisbourg, the architect, usually Jacques Dailibard, came from Ottawa. Pooling

our research findings and drawing on typical period details, the team came up with a design which was submitted to the park's Structural Design Committee for approval. A calculator was always necessary at the first meeting as the archaeologist's metric dimensions and the historian's historic measurements were converted to the design drawing's feet and inches. (An 18<sup>th</sup>-century *piéd* was 1.066 feet.) Through such team work we learned an appreciation and respect for each other's disciplines. Disagreements, when they arose, were not taken personally, which was a good thing since most of us were neighbours in the government housing area.

In the following years, a similar interdisciplinary approach was applied to other aspects of the fortress, such as the period presentation committee and the food committee, one I particularly enjoyed as we got to sample 18<sup>th</sup>-century-style dishes prepared by Denise Le Blanc. Research expanded from reconstruction to material culture and interpretation of life in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Louisbourg.

Work in the history section provided opportunities beyond doing research and attending meetings. I was on the founding committee of the Volunteer Association and, like many of my colleagues, occasionally spent time after hours in costume on the site for special events. I was able to spend five weeks in the Public Record Office, London, reading previously unopened, captured French documents from the War of the Austrian Succession.

Many historians came and went over the years. John Fortier became our Research Director in 1969, bringing his professionalism and dedication, qualities he expected from his staff. John Dunn and then Robert Morgan became Senior Historian. For a time, there was an informal connection with the Université de Montréal, with graduates and graduate students carrying out work at Louisbourg. There was also a brief connection with the University of Ottawa; Professors Cornelius Jaenen and Marcel Trudel came to do bi-annual seminars with the research staff. Louisbourg became of interest to academics who had previously given little thought to French colonies outside of Quebec, usually treating New France as the colony along the St. Lawrence. Colleagues who followed me at Louisbourg are now widely pub-

lished and sought after for conferences. A young graduate would have little hope of getting employment as a staff historian now.

I have a special spot in my heart for the Fortress of Louisbourg and for Block 2 in particular. At Louisbourg I was able to hone my research skills and to develop an expertise in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Nova Scotia. My interest in applied research and my appreciation of team work have remained with me throughout my career, as has my sense of connection to the sites I am researching. I made many close friends, who remain friends today. I left twice, once for graduate school and once for family reasons, but I always returned. My interest continued when I left in 1976 to become an historian in the new history section in the Parks Canada Atlantic Regional Office in Halifax. I was fortunate to be at Louisbourg during the heady days of the Fortress of Louisbourg and Parks Canada.

### **Christopher Moore: “My Louisbourg Career, 1972-1975”**

I worked for the historic sites service of Parks Canada at Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Park from the spring of 1972 until the fall of 1975, first as a temporary research assistant, then as a staff historian.

In 2013, still active in a historical career that has taken me far from Louisbourg but never suppressed my interest in New France, the eighteenth century, Atlantic Canada, and Louisbourg, I returned to Sydney and Louisbourg to attend a French Colonial Historical Society conference there. At the first session, I listened to a graduate student deliver an interesting paper about the New England occupation force at Louisbourg in 1745-49. It was gratifying to hear him quote something that “the historian Christopher Moore” had written in the mid-1970s. I thought that I would be able to surprise him by introducing myself at the end of the session. Then, more ruefully, I realized he might be more surprised than I first imagined. He quite likely thought the old historian he was quoting was safely *dead*. I still thought of the historians who work at Louisbourg and elsewhere in the Parks Canada system as my colleagues, but if in 1972 I had met a historian who had been working on that subject in 1930, I might not have felt we had much in common.

Even though I began to work at Louisbourg in 1972, I cannot testify to the origins of historic-site reconstruction work at Louisbourg. 1972 was barely a decade on from the first proposal for what became the massive, multi-decade, multi-million dollar reconstruction project that was about to employ me. Today that must seem close to the origins. But when I arrived in May 1972, it did not feel like a place that was just beginning. The fortress in 1972 was a going concern. When I drove toward the administration building to report for work the day I arrived there, I could see, already rebuilt, the walls of the Dauphin's and King's bastions and the citadel complex with its clock tower. Even some of the town side buildings were up, although most of that area was fenced off and busy with archaeological projects and construction traffic.

The fortress was already a tourist magnet with substantial visitor traffic through the temporary Visitor Centre, then housed in what had once been the local school for the people of "west" Louisbourg, all of whom had been expropriated and removed by Park Canada when the reconstruction began. The park already employed many summer students as guides and animators. (Indeed, I spent that first summer there rooming with and socializing with a lively group of students hired from across Atlantic Canada for that work.) And to a 21 year old arriving in Louisbourg for his first real post-university job, the administration office, tucked out of sight in the woods up the hill from the harbour, definitely suggested a large, well-established ongoing project in 1972.

My only credentials to do research work at Louisbourg or anywhere else were a bachelor's degree in history from the University of British Columbia and some command of French. But, as the HR officer at Parks Canada's Centennial Towers HQ in Ottawa told me, it happened that no research-assistant applicants in the Maritimes had claimed bilingual skills. He hired me after a cursory interview he conducted himself because, having called me to a 9:00 am appointment, he discovered no historians had come into the office that early. Hired, I fled to a public library for an atlas, an encyclopedia, and a history text to find where and what this Louisbourg was. Never having studied any-



thing related to New France in my life, never having even been to Nova Scotia before, I left a few days later to drive a beat-up old van from Ottawa to Louisbourg. Arriving, I walked into the reception area of what seemed to me a busy and even rather formidable office building and presented the precious letter of employment that directed me to report to Park Superintendent Dr. John Lunn.

“I think we can take care of this,” said the receptionist, and I did not meet John Lunn that morning. In a few moments, one of the admin staff took me officially on strength and led me down the corridor to meet senior historian Robert Morgan on what the staff called “the history floor.” My professional life began.

Two notable changes took place in the research department at Louisbourg about the time I worked in it. First, the research staff, rather like the colonial cod fishery in the eighteenth century, changed decisively from migrant labour to sedentary workers. When Parks Canada first created a research unit at Louisbourg, none of its Ottawa staff wanted to be dispatched there. In its first decade, most of the Louisbourg researchers were people who drifted in for a few years, worked intensely, and then drifted away: Linda Hoad, Monique LaGrenade, Blaine Adams, Christian Pouyez, Henri-Paul Thibault, Victor Suthren, Gilles Proulx. Some moved to academic or teaching careers, some to museums or historic sites elsewhere, some became potters or politicians or entrepreneurs. But few were locals, and few stayed. At the time I arrived, the six historians on the history floor included three francophones pining for a Quebec they thought to be on the verge of independence. The research unit often worked and socialized in French, and my command of the language became about as good as I had claimed it was. The housing area, where we and other Parks Canada migrants lived, (“Snob Hill” to the locals) was not particularly wild, really, despite the stories, but we were footloose, we did come preparing to move on. For us, research at Louisbourg was an adventure, not a career.

By the mid-1970s, the fortress research program was beginning to find bright, young, mostly anglophone Nova Scotians, often with new Ph.D.s., looking to come home and make careers

close to home and family. A few come-from-aways stayed long term: Ontarians Bob Morgan and Eric Krause, and archaeologist Bruce Fry from Britain. But work at Louisbourg brought several “back” to Nova Scotia: Terry MacLean of Sydney, Ken Donovan of Ingonish, John Johnston of Truro, Sandy Balcom of Lunenburg. Most of them lived in Sydney, not Louisbourg, but suddenly the fortress had a research team that would stay for decades instead of a few years.

The other great change in the research program, coinciding with my years at Louisbourg, was the shift from all architecture, all the time, to a blossoming of social, economic, and cultural research. In the early years of the fortress project, historians and archaeologists had operated just months ahead of the reconstruction teams. Each historian took responsibility for one town block, assembling every possible detail about the block’s architecture, so that a new version of the block could arise in stone and brick and timber. Everything revolved around design meetings, in which the researchers pitched what they knew about the look and form of Louisbourg’s buildings, often against architects, engineers, and project managers with their own ideas about building styles and concerns about electrical circuits, visitor flow, fire safety and the like.

Arriving in 1972, I hardly participated in that historical architecture process. Ten years of relentless effort had reduced practically every glimmering of information about Louisbourg architecture into a massively cross-indexed set of flimsy file cards reposing in black filing cabinets lining the walls of a couple of offices. Instead of every historian on the team working urgently on architecture, the filing system meant architecture could become the concern of one or two, and eventually mostly Eric Krause. The rest of us could take to other subjects linked less to building the fortress than to animating and explaining it for the growing number of visitors. Christian Pouyez, French-trained and the author of one of those magisterial French doctorates on the *histoire économique et sociale* of a small early-modern French community, launched a demographic study. Monique La-Grenade researched costume. (My first assignment was to translate her reports for the unilingual English staff in Florence

MacIntyre's quite wonderful costume department.) Victor Suthren researched a drill manual for the fortress's first military animation programs. Soon after I established myself at Louisbourg, I took up research on the town's shipping, trade, and commodity imports, and gradually expanded my interests to many daily life issues, from food to burial practices to quayside commerce. In later years, John Johnston would study religion, Ken Donovan slaves and other minorities, Anne-Marie Lane Jonah foodways, and Sandy Balcom material culture. We had successfully added people to the stones.

Whatever we researched, we were a team of researchers intensely focused on the same subject, the single half-century of a relatively small community that, even as we worked, was being reconstructed down the hill from us. Historians, even in the big and bureaucratic universities and public agencies, tend to be solitary: one historian, one article or book, and then on to the next topic. Even in the era of internet research and digital copying, historians often have a university or museum office remote from the archives where their research materials sit in vast collections with their own professional keepers. On the Louisbourg history floor in my time there, we were half a dozen historians, with few other responsibilities, with abundant support staff, a good small library, and all our million pages of archival materials readily accessible in a couple of small microfilm cabinets just down the hall. An abundance of finding aids and indexes, some of which we had made ourselves, were shelved alongside, with the entire map collection in another cabinet. We did not even sign out finding aids or microfilm reels, as I recall; everyone knew what everyone had.

Asked to describe my Louisbourg research experience to grad school colleagues later, I blurted out, "They put my head in a microfilm reader for a year. And when I pulled it out, I knew quite a bit about New France." I did too, though my historical education was document-based to an extraordinary degree, and I went to the books later. To the extent we used secondary sources at all, it was *Annales E.S.C.*, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, and the *Journal of the Association for Preservation Technology* more than the *Canadian Historical Review*. For the things we wanted

to know about Louisbourg, there were no secondary sources. We built from the ground up, reading the handwritten eighteenth-century French of notaries, magistrate's clerks, Récollet priests, and royal bureaucrats, trying to explore questions they had never dreamed of answering. We learned of room furnishings from wills and testaments, caught glimpses of street life from trial witnesses, assembled the contents of larders from ships' loadings. We experienced, I think, what the American diplomatic historian William Appleman Williams called 'the intense confrontation with human reality that comes from archival research' — a phrase that makes non-historians laugh in disbelief, but which researchers seem to understand.

My first week at Louisbourg, I thought my career was doomed. I learned to thread microfilm onto a reader, but I could not read the handwriting of the sources. The day, a couple of months later, when I could decipher the words "drap d'Elbeuf" and explain to a puzzled veteran precisely what that was — that was the day I cemented my place on the team. We never had to work alone. All the historians were working on the same documents about the same place and people. We did not really know everyone in eighteenth century Louisbourg by their first names, but we felt close to that. In my memory, we call constantly up and down the hall for advice or consultation. The historians knew each other's research needs and challenges intimately, and all our research informed everyone else's. Close by, too, were the archaeologists and the conservators and the draftsmen and the interpretation specialists, and guides and animators to share with, too, to try to explain and draw new questions from. And there was "the site" itself. If the weather was nice and the work seemed a little flat, you could run down to the fortress itself, and find yourself talking with a family whose summer camping trip to the Maritimes had brought them to this amazing piece of history they had barely heard of the previous day, suddenly ravenous for someone to talk to them about it.

I have been almost uniquely fortunate in the range of wonderful historical work experiences I have had in the decades since, but I never had another quite like that one. I will conclude with two lessons, one slightly boastful, one more bleak.

The historical profession, it mostly appears, trains young historians by making them read and criticize the writings of other historians. As students, undergraduates, even master's students, apprentice historians read older historians' texts and monographs and articles endlessly, mastering the state of the question and the ways that historical discourse is framed, barely seeing a documentary archives. Very few academic history programs do history itself, in the sense of immersing young historians in archival sources and giving them the research experience of trying to reconstruct a life, a time, a world, from the evidence that happens to survive for us. Ultimately most students work largely alone, reading historians' works and writing their own essays, theses, and dissertations. Even when doctoral candidates actually do get to make the archival pilgrimage, they usually have their research and their deadlines mapped out. Far from swimming in the sources until an understanding emerges, they must too often go in and come out according to their agenda already fixed.

I do not disdain book learning and the wisdom of other scholars, but I believe I was greatly favoured in doing my historical apprenticeship so close to the documents, not to answer a single question but seeking to follow almost everything, and so close to other colleagues on the same quests. Allow me my boast: I think my historical apprenticeship was better than yours, because I worked in the research program of the Fortress of Louisbourg at its apex.

The bleaker thought: perhaps we blew what we had. We left a shelf of research reports and a decent handful of substantial books on various aspects of Louisbourg. But I fear the accumulated collective wisdom of the Louisbourg research team is fading along with us. The research engine at Louisbourg is now mostly dismantled, yet the big standard survey history of the place is still the one J.S McLennan published in 1918. I'm proud to own a first edition of it, but now I see we never even tried to replace it. We had the sources, the knowledge, the expertise to have produced some multi-volume, multi-author *histoire totale* of Louisbourg, something that could have been a profound contribution to New France and eighteenth century scholarship and would have shaped everyone's idea of Louisbourg forever. But

we were not that kind of team, we didn't write it, and I expect we never will.

Last August I returned to Louisbourg, and paid my admission like any other visitor. We rode the bus to the Dauphin Gate, ate a meal in the tavern, watched the soldiers drill and the kids run about in *culottes* and *chemises*. We took a guided tour. The guide was an engaging performer and very good in keeping a large group together and attentive. But much of the history of Louisbourg we got on the tour had existed before the "history floor" began to work. It took surprisingly little account of all the knowledge we produced there. When the guide gave us the hoary myth of Louis XV saying he expected the walls of Louisbourg to rise over the horizon at Versailles, I thought: we did some remarkable historical work here, but I'm not sure we even sold it successfully to the rest of the project.

Still there is a Louisbourg that still lives, fully furnished, in the back of my head somewhere, as real to me as the one we built there on the shore of Louisbourg harbour.

### **Ken Donovan: "Reflections of a Louisbourg historian, 1976-2011"**

I drove from Kingston, Ontario and arrived in Sydney in early June 1976 to take up my new job as an historian at Louisbourg. My wife, Barbara, who was nine-months pregnant, had flown home a few days earlier with Susanne, our five-year-old daughter. The first few days after arrival were a bit apprehensive. On Sunday morning 7 June a horrible fire began in Mainadieu that eventually destroyed the Roman Catholic church, the glebe house and 17 homes. Would the fire spread to Louisbourg? Would I have a job to go to? The road to Louisbourg had been closed but eventually the wind died down and the fire was brought under control.

I reported for work at Louisbourg in mid June. My son Brad was born on 6 July and my course was set. Louisbourg was an amazing place, a well-funded historical experiment that became a significant cultural institution. I still fondly recall Brenda Dunn, a young historian, taking me around and introducing me to colleagues, including historians, archaeologists, trades people

and administrative staff. Her kindness remains in my memory to this day.

I have always felt fortunate to get a position devoted to history in Cape Breton. After about a month at Louisbourg, I realized that I was distinctive, cut from a different cloth than the other historians and professional staff at Louisbourg. A native Cape Bretoner, proud of my Ingonish roots, I was a Cape Breton nationalist determined to write, publish and promote Cape Breton history. Maybe it has something to do with coming from an island, but I have not strayed much from that path since my early days as an undergraduate at St. Francis Xavier University. I also worked as an historian at Louisbourg for 35 years and that was longer than anyone else in that position.

Louisbourg was the largest research project, by any measure, in Canadian history. It became Canada's largest and most sophisticated historic site. We had marvellous finding aids developed by dedicated historians such as Gilles Proulx and Eric Krause, among others. There was a treasure trove of cartographic, iconographic and archaeological resources including more than 500 maps, plans and views of Louisbourg during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Many of these maps, blown up on canvassed-backed photographic paper, became invaluable research tools. Laid out in metal hanging cabinets and drawers in chronological order, the "map collection" was detailed, stunning and beautiful and spoke volumes about the pre-eminent role of France in the Enlightenment. We quickly learned, however, that it was vital to distinguish, whenever possible, between what was planned and what was built. Much of the cartographic evidence was published in 1972 by John Fortier who was head of research at the time. The title, "The Fortress of Louisbourg and its Cartographic Evidence", *Bulletin of the Association of Preservation Technology*, vol. 14, nos. 1-2, became a part of each historian's bookshelf much like J.S. McLennan's *Louisbourg: From its Foundation to its Fall*. Louisbourg eventually developed a library of 32,000 accessions and we could get access to almost any book or journal we wanted.

## Research and Context

The research demands of Canada's largest historical reconstruction were often demanding. The research effort was unprecedented: hundreds of period maps and plans, 750,000 pages of historical documents and millions of archaeological artifacts, including the impressive masonry ruins of fortification walls and town buildings. Most of the research was devoted to supporting the operational requirements of the historic site. Hundreds of papers and manuals were produced on topics ranging from the history of family life and the rearing of children to the use of cutlery and manuals on various houses as well as games and gaming. We participated in period presentation teams with people from disciplines such as archaeology, history, visitor services, engineers, drafts people, material-culture specialists and managers. It was critical to bring primary evidence to support each decision and this evidence had to be placed in a broader context. This could be an intimidating process especially for anyone, especially a young person, inexperienced with various disciplines, including material culture.

Team members debated the merits of the evidence presented to the meeting and eventually came to a decision as to how to proceed. I remember one of my first meetings with Jim Howe of the interpretative program as well as curator Rosemary Hutchison and Dee Shaw who were connected with reproductions. We were looking at developing a reproduction child's ladder-back chair for the interpretative program. Why reproductions? Activities such as costumed animation eventually "consume" objects; Parks Canada used (and continues to use) reproductions to preserve originals. Besides, few wooden objects, especially smaller items, survived from the 18<sup>th</sup> century because they wore out from constant use or the wood was destroyed by insects.

There had been an extensive picture-file collection developed with illustrated pages cut out from hundreds of books (remember, this was pre-internet). One of the questions concerned a child's ladder-back chair: were such chairs intentionally built for a child or were the chairs merely cut down versions of adult ladder back-chairs? In other words, the legs had have been sawed off. One aspect of the discussion focused on the artist's



depiction of the chairs that we examined in paintings from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Which artist could be trusted, in terms of how they painted objects of everyday life? All artists have to distort perspective, to trick the eye a bit, so this was a revealing experience.

We soon learned that Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779) was considered one of the world's greatest realists and we grew to trust him. A master of still life, Chardin painted only 200 genre scenes throughout his life; these typically included kitchen maids, children and domestic interiors. We all came to recognize the pewter plates, French wine bottles and copper water cisterns in Chardin's painting "Return from Market", 1739. The pewter plates and French wine bottles were familiar objects since they were the same as those excavated at Louisbourg. Jean Palardy (1905-1991) had purchased at least two water copper cisterns just like those portrayed in Chardin's painting. Palardy, an artist, filmmaker, author and antiques expert, had published *Early Furniture in French Canada* and he was the recognized expert in the field. Palardy travelled throughout France and the world collecting now-priceless 18th century antiques that formed the basis for Louisbourg's furnishing plans and subsequent artifact reproduction program. He also developed a good relationship between Louisbourg and the French School of Military Engineers.

The same was true of the objects in Chardin's painting of "A woman Peeling Turnips." (1738) The Saintonge earthen-ware bowl with the green glaze only on the interior of the bowl looked just like the bowls that had been excavated at Louisbourg and put back together with meticulous skill in the archaeology department. Gil Hancock, a master craftsmen and potter, reproduced these bowls to line, level and fabric with expert advice from archaeologists such as Andree Crépeau and material culture specialists Jim Campbell and Heidi Moses, among others.

### **Louisbourg and Historical Scholarship**

I arrived at a time when much of the physical reconstruction of the bastions and buildings had been completed. We were hired to supply historical research for the interpretative pro-

gram, not block reports for the reconstruction of buildings. We were asked to help fill in the “soft” areas, the gaps of knowledge that were required for interpretation. We were immersed in the documents and became involved in what I like to call incidental research. You might be researching on games and gaming and come across a reference to music or family life or the presence of Germans in Louisbourg. We all kept extensive files and we shared evidence on other people’s research interests. We had a collegial atmosphere and we took pride in other people’s accomplishments. When I think back, one of our collective, although unstated, goals was to put Louisbourg on the scholarly map. In 1976, there was little historical, scholarly material published on Cape Breton or Atlantic Canada, for that matter. *Acadiensis*, the flagship historical journal in Atlantic Canada, had only been established at the University of New Brunswick in 1971.

We started to deliver papers at conferences and workshops each year and organized conferences ourselves and began to publish in various journals. Louisbourg’s first big coming out event, at least in scholarly terms, was the publication of Christopher Moore’s *Louisbourg Portraits: Life in an 18<sup>th</sup> century Town*. Based on years of research and historical imagination, *Louisbourg Portraits* explored eighteenth century social history through the lives of ordinary people. The book, a *tour de force*, won the Governor General’s literary prize for nonfiction in 1982 and has been in print ever since. My colleagues and I took great pride in this publication because Chris was one of us, having been an historian at Louisbourg from 1972 to 1975.

The publication of Louisbourg historical material increased dramatically with the arrival of John Johnston in 1977. Over the next 23 years John led all Louisbourg historians in terms of the publication of books, articles and a wide range of popular publications in magazines, exhibit texts and newspapers. Some of John’s major books on Louisbourg include: *Religion in Life at Louisbourg, 1713-1758* (McGill-Queen’s, 1984); *Control and Order in French Colonial Louisbourg, 1713-1758* (Michigan State, 2001) and *Endgame 1758: The Promise, the Glory and the Despair of Louisbourg’s Last Decade* (University of Nebraska,

2008). The French Republic paid John a marvellous tribute in 2011 when he was made a knight, a *chevalier* of its Ordre des Palmes Académiques in recognition of his contribution to French Colonial history in Atlantic Canada. The Ordre des Palmes Académiques is a French Order of Chivalry for contributions toward French education and culture – one of the oldest distinctions given. It is a rare honour for a foreigner to be named to the order. Foreign honours bestowed on Canadians require the approval of the Governor-General.

Sandy Balcom, Louisbourg historian and curator, has also published on a range of topics including his influential book on *The Cod Fishery of Isle Royale, 1713-1758* (Parks Canada, 1984). He has published major articles on the 1745 siege of Louisbourg and Mi'kmaw history in Cape Breton. Although retired, Sandy continues to draw upon his extensive research files and to publish on Louisbourg history. Witness his excellent article in this issue of the Nashwaak entitled: “A Question of Treason: Irish Participation on Louisbourg Privateers 1744”.

My own journey on the road to historical contributions began in 1977 with a publication on “Family Life in Louisbourg”. In 1979 I was invited by Cole Harris to join the historical atlas of Canada project. Over the next eight years I worked on my plate entitled “Île Royale, 18th Century, Plate 24,” in R. Cole Harris, ed., Geoffrey Matthews, cartographer, *Historical Atlas of Canada: From the Beginning to 1800*, Vol. I (Toronto, 1987). The atlas was also published in French by the Université de Montréal and eventually 100,000 copies of the atlas were published and distributed worldwide. Through corporate sponsorship, every high school in Ontario and Alberta also received a copy of the Atlas. As part of the pre-publication publicity for the *Atlas*, the Île Royale plate was one of five plates reproduced in full size and colour and distributed throughout the world. As part of the largest distribution by any press in Canadian history, copies of the Île Royale plate were distributed by the University of Toronto Press in Canada, the United States, England, continental Europe, Japan, continental Asia, Africa, South America, Australia and New Zealand. The Historical Atlas of Canada continues today with the “Online Learning Project” that is intended to make the maps and

data generated for the Atlas available to a wider audience by re-designing them for the internet.

I continued my historical work by eventually editing and co-authoring seven books on Cape Breton and Louisbourg history. The edited collections entitled *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial, 1785-1985* (University College of Cape Breton Press, 1985) and *The Island: New Perspectives on Cape Breton History, 1713-1990* (Acadiensis and University College of Cape Breton Press, 1990) integrated Louisbourg research and publications into Cape Breton history. I also went on to publish an additional 50 historical articles, including the history of slavery, music, gardens and astronomy as well as the cultural awakening of Cape Breton.

### **Staff Training and Teaching**

Thousands of interpretative staff have been trained in the social, cultural and military history of Louisbourg. We developed a week-long training program for our staff with level one and level two components. People typically had to take level one before they were issued a costume. This was park superintendant's John Fortier's idea and it was strictly enforced. After the first year, the interpretative staff and guides always had to repeat level one before they could move on to level two. As part of the level two process, there were seminars and excursions throughout the historic site. The purpose of the teaching had been to inspire new and returning staff and to make them familiar with various publications so they could improve their knowledge of 18th-Century Louisbourg. As the interpretative staff gained experience and confidence from talking and interacting with visitors, they asked numerous, critical questions. Professors at universities on the Nova Scotia mainland and other Maritime universities could always tell when their students had worked at Louisbourg because they had learned a certain sensibility about the 18<sup>th</sup> century: they had an understanding of the historical past. They knew, for example, about the costumes people wore, the foods people ate and the general range of material culture that people had in their daily lives. These were issues that were not usually discussed in university classes. Curators talked about the furnishing collections, garden

curators talked about how they planted their foods and the various plants that people ate including herbs and medicinal plants.

### **Community Outreach**

In addition to the economic impact, Louisbourg has also played a vital role as a cultural institution in Cape Breton and has had considerable impact in terms of community outreach and education. Louisbourg senior historian Robert Morgan (1970-1975) and Katherine McLennan, the first curator of the Louisbourg museum, were among the founders of the Old Sydney Society in 1966. Beginning that same year, the Old Sydney Society began to offer monthly historical meetings from October to April that have continued ever since. The meetings feature guest speakers who present their papers on some aspect of Cape Breton history. Bob Morgan started these meetings and he asked me to take over in 1979 and I have been doing it ever since.

The Old Sydney Society currently administers four museums in Sydney's historic north end. Parks Canada's centennial in 1985 and Sydney's Bicentennial that same year offered further opportunities for cooperation between Louisbourg and the Old Sydney Society. With generous support from Louisbourg, I fund raised and produced the book by Debra McNabb and Lewis Parker entitled *Old Sydney Town: Historic Buildings of the North End, 1785 to 1938* (Old Sydney Society, 1986). Designed by Louisbourg exhibit designer Horst Paufler and edited by Louisbourg historian John Johnston, the book won an international juried award, the Certificate of Merit from the American Society of State and Local history in California. The book also received the Barber-Ellis prize for the best published book in Atlantic Canada in 1986. The work stimulated public interest in the historic architecture of Sydney and lead to the designation of historic buildings in the city and to the eventual establishment of a historic district in Sydney's historic north end.

### **Conclusion**

The year 2013 has marked three centuries since Louisbourg's founding and over five decades since the reconstruction began. By 1960 Cape Breton's industrial coal and steel economy

was in crisis or stagnation. The Government of Canada thus began North America's largest historical reconstruction in 1961 to stimulate the economy. The creation of hundreds of new jobs provided an immediate economic stimulus. The successful celebrations of Louisbourg's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013 demonstrated that Louisbourg remains vitally important to Cape Breton's tourism industry. In addition to the economic impact, Louisbourg has also played a critical role as a cultural institution in Cape Breton and had considerable impact in terms of community outreach and education. Community groups including Cape Breton University, schools, service clubs, museums, historical societies and seniors groups were among some of the beneficiaries of this outreach which continues to the present day.



*Louisbourg Historians, 1979, clockwise:  
Gilles Prouls, Eric Krause, John Johnston, Terry MacLean, Ken  
Donovan, Chris Moore, Bob Morgan, Brenda Dunn, Maria Razzolini.*

## **B.A. (Sandy) Balcom: “Reflections on Authenticity at a Reconstructed Site, 1976-1979, 1987-2012”**

The Louisbourg reconstruction project that began in the 1960s has proved a marvelous quest to recapture a lost age. At its beginning there were only the proverbial grass-covered ruins, a 1930s museum and caretaker’s house, a few roads and signs. When construction finished and interpretation began, there was a defined reconstructed quarter of an 18th-century fortified town, over 60 significant buildings with many refurnished to period, major fortification features, exhibits and a large costumed animation staff. The site continues to enjoy an international reputation for excellence in its reconstruction and programming, based on the project’s adherence to a unique concept of authenticity. It was my good fortune, beginning in 1976 to work there for 28 of my just over 35 years with Parks Canada.

From a relatively early age, the Fortress loomed large on my horizons. There were boyhood visits with my family during the mid-1960s, when the project was just beginning and much in the news. With large areas fenced off for the archaeology and construction program, site interpretation depended more on one’s imagination than on buildings and costumed animation. As a sometime military modeler myself, the Katherine McLennan model of the entire fortified town and the newer, more detailed models of the Dauphin Demi-bastion under siege, the Royal Battery and the King’s Bastion all fired my imagination. Later, a work of historical fiction, F. Van Wyck Mason’s *The Young Titans*, provided a stirring tale culminating in the first siege of Louisbourg that had me spellbound. While I cringe now at some of the interpretations, the author’s vivid descriptions of everyday life, as well as rousing action, piqued my interest. Finally in 1970 fresh out of high school, I took a “gap summer” in search of direction and returned to Louisbourg. A two-month archaeology course at the Fortress pointed me towards public history. After years in university, I joined the Louisbourg project as a term historian. At the time, I did not recognize just how formative the project was, it already seemed that it was as firmly fixed in its direction as its massive masonry walls.

From its earliest beginnings, the Fortress of Louisbourg project envisioned a site where history came alive, or perhaps

more properly in today's parlance, a site where visitors fully "experienced" the past. The concept envisioned not a staid museum with the past displayed beyond the visitor's touch in controlled environments, but a living history site where the past surrounded and bombarded the visitor on every side. Every sense was to be stimulated – the smell of wood smoke and fresh-baked bread; the sound of silk rustling and cannons roaring; the feel of polished wood and coarse wool, the sight of slate roofs gleaming in sunlight and colourful costumes in the street, and finally the smoky taste of pea soup, or for the adventurous, foaming dark ale. It was a powerful vision and the staff worked hard to achieve it.

To guide their efforts, the historic site developed the concept of authenticity. Obviously, as a reconstruction, Louisbourg was not "authentic" in the true sense of the word. Within a few years of the project's start, reconstructions lost the support of the heritage movement in favour of preserving more intact sites, more genuinely authentic sites. By 1979, with Louisbourg's reconstruction still in progress, Parks Canada policy placed stringent conditions on future reconstructions. Foremost among these, reconstructions had to be "essential to public understanding of the historical associations and appearance of the site." At Louisbourg, the creation of this public understanding already depended on a special usage of authenticity to refer to an adherence to evidence-based historical accuracy. The concept was exemplified by an attention to "line, level and fabric" in reproductions. Line referred to the design, level to degree of craftsmanship and fabric to the materials. Reproductions, buildings and activities that were accurate in terms of their line, level and fabric, were judged to be "authentic".

Authenticity proved to be an elusive goal. Despite the project's extensive archival and archeological collections, gaps in knowledge existed and many answers had to be synthesized from period practices. Similarly, some materials were either no longer available or only so at prohibitive costs. For example, mild steel, in spite of its greater propensity to rust, became the common substitute for scarce supplies of wrought iron. Lost skills, such as timber-hewing and stone-cutting, had to be re-introduced and developed, and proved difficult to maintain as the project's workforce decreased.



Still the degree of information accumulated was staggering and pertained not only to buildings, furnishings and costumes but to the very householders themselves. Period townfolk, who had resided within the reconstructed area, received intense historical scrutiny, while their neighbours across the street in unexcavated ground, remained in obscurity. Individual foibles as well as strengths became known, and staff gossiped over coffee about Louisbourgeois, who had died some 200 years earlier.

The efforts of two early superintendents – John Lunn (1962- 1975) and John Fortier – were significant to the development of the site's adherence to authenticity. Lunn, who established the footprint of the reconstruction, also nurtured the concept of authenticity and established multidisciplinary committees to implement it. These committees provided critical meeting places for professionals to debate the requirements of authenticity and how best to achieve them. His successor, John Fortier, took over in 1975 and continued the promotion of authenticity. His annual pre-opening site inspections, section heads in attendance, emphasized the importance of authenticity in site presentation to all staff. Incongruities, some as simple as a single visible modern nail, warranted inclusion on a list of improvements to be made before opening.

Although well engrained at the site, authenticity was never an easy row to hoe. Increasingly more stringent building, health and safety codes necessitated compromises between 18<sup>th</sup> century realities and what was permissible to recreate today. Tightening budgets required creative, and often compromising, solutions. The disaffection of some staff for the concept often came wrapped in one of two sayings. The first, “logic would dictate” usually covered situations where staff applied modern norms and sensibilities to period situations. The second, “but the visitors don't know the difference,” was worse. It often justified convenience, not necessity, and reduced the very essence of period presentation to the morality of certain latter-day politicians, which is seemingly only demonstrated when lit by the glare of public scrutiny. A reverse situation occurred when new evidence or new interpretations of old evidence changed previously established norms. Some staff had difficulty accepting

the organic nature of authenticity and lost faith in the research-based process.

In spite of the difficulties, the site's adherence to its own brand of authenticity created a truly remarkable reconstruction and programming. For those willing to experience it, Fortress Louisbourg is the true "magic kingdom," where time travel is possible. While these "moments in time" are fleeting and don't come to everyone, they have provided countless "wow" moments to generations of visitors, and staff alike. It is a legacy well worth preserving as the site enters its fourth century.

### **A.J.B. Johnston: What Louisbourg Means to Me, 1977-2000**

Distilled to its essence, Louisbourg is about dreams. Precisely 300 years ago, and for nearly a half century after, it was France's *rêve impérial* to begin on this Cape Breton shore a grand new chapter in its colonization of North America. Within that macro dream were thousands of micro dreams: colonists hoping for better lives than wherever they'd been before. A competing British and Anglo-American imperial vision brought military expeditions to this place, first in 1745 and then irrevocably in 1758, supplanting the French dream and replacing it with their own. For the next century and a half, the dreams that lived here were modest: making a living and raising families along this harbour. But then, beginning in the late nineteenth century, another dream took hold. Research then monuments, then expropriation and protection: Historical enthusiasts strove to recall and mark what had been, and ultimately Canadian taxpayers paid for a dream of rebuilding a portion of what had vanished two centuries before.

I first came to Louisbourg as a child. It was the 1950s and my family made several trips to the site as it then was: the 1930s Museum with its green roof, a few dirt roads, some signs and what were said to be the ruins of the bygone settlement in grass-covered heaps and mounds. And the wind, harbour, ocean and Black Rock. The novelist inside me says I met Katharine McLennan when we were inside the Museum on one of those trips. The historian in me doubts I really did.

When I think back to those early visits to Louisbourg, I have to wonder: was I like one of Konrad Lorenz's geese? Did

the Louisbourg seascape make some kind of deep imprint on me, enough to call me back in later years?

I came to Louisbourg again on an educational group trip circa 1966. The reconstruction project was a prominent national story of the time. I recall a woman with auburn hair talking about archaeological artifacts. Her beauty rekindled my enthusiasm for the place, or maybe it was something else that she sparked. I was sixteen.

It turned out that my youthful visits to Louisbourg, and to places like the Port-Royal Habitation and Grand-Pré, set the stage for the career I would later have. Coming out of university in the 1970s, in an interview for a position at Newfoundland's Terra Nova National Park, I could easily talk about how Parks Canada's parks and sites were important to me. En route to take up that first job with Parks in 1974, Mary and I visited the Fortress. The place was incredibly rebuilt and re-peopled, not so much as it would be later on, but in comparison with the 1950s and early 1960s, it was miraculous. Along with the buildings there were well-informed characters in costumes who seemed to be living their parts. Back in Halifax after our Newfoundland adventure, I went to work at the Citadel. Three years later, in the summer of 1977, I was offered the opportunity to transfer from being a historian of 19th-century British military history to become instead a researcher at 18th-century Louisbourg. I leapt at the chance.

For the next 23 years I read books and articles, studied artwork and generally immersed myself in reel after reel of documents about innumerable aspects of the 18th-century French colonial life and times. Those at the Fortress before my time had assembled an amazing library and archives. There were nearly a million pages of Louisbourg-specific records as well as hundreds of maps and plans. The ensemble offered insights into the cradle-to-grave lives of thousands of people. On a larger scale, the massive documentation opened windows into a culture, an economy, a society and two pivotal sieges in the history of North America. On yet another level, Louisbourg offers an archetypal narrative of hopes and dreams being realised then dashed.

Together — and that's the key word — together, we historians, archivists, architects, archaeologists, clerks, curators, ar-

tisans of many crafts, interpreters, guides and managers who cared, together we aimed to figure out the intellectual puzzle of Louisbourg on a grand scale. The colleagues who influenced and inspired me the most, in alphabetical order, were : Sandy Balcom, Ken Donovan, John Fortier, Eric Krause, Yvon LeBlanc, Terry MacLean and Bill O'Shea. We were a history laboratory, a quasi-think tank on the past. Our fundamental questions were: What had been this place, this Louisbourg, and what could it be now? We found our individual and collective answers, and laid them out on pages, panels, exhibits and in a re-created world.

I had the good fortune over my years at the Fortress to research and write on all kinds of topics in all kinds of ways. I wrote manuals for staff, minutes of meetings, memos and reports, texts for exhibits, and conference papers, articles and books. My toolkit as a historian and writer developed here. It's possible I might have acquired the same set of skills somewhere else, but I doubt it. That's because not many places offer such rich depth. The Fortress gave me the chance to write long and to write short. It allowed me to explore academic nuances one day while at the same time simplifying that same subject matter the next day for those who didn't have an academic background or much time. Along the way, I discovered I liked writing as much as research.

Louisbourg for me is a sensory as well as an intellectual place. There is the history we think really was, and there's the *vraisemblance* that we — 13 years gone and I still say we — we aim to present. It has long struck me that historic sites, some more than others, help make history real, more tangible than any essay, speaker or university course. At their best, using sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, the Fortress can be the actor who lifts the words off the page and gives them life. No, it doesn't happen all the time or maybe not even often, but the potential is there, with the right animators in the right place at the right time.

A sinking land and a rising sea will eventually swallow portions of the low-elevation Fortress. The treasure that is re-constructed Louisbourg will diminish then perhaps be gone. That day, however, is still a ways off.

When I think of Louisbourg, and I often do, what comes to mind is not anything I've written or said. It's what the place

evokes regarding the trembling balance between the eternal and the ephemeral. It's all that its location and its history has inspired: so many books and articles, so much art and photography; and so many careers launched and fine-tuned. On a personal level it's Mary's and my kids in period costume playing their parts; our daughter's wedding on a perfect evening in 1999. It's the place when lit by only candles and stars. The view from Lighthouse Point, the North Shore or coming down the compound road. The intensity of the bricks, slate, stone and wood glowing in late afternoon light. It's a Te Deum intoned in the chapel, and the heart-beat of the Atlantic as the waves cascade on the beach at Kennington Cove. And it's those many dreams this place called Louisbourg has fostered, against the backdrop of wind, harbour, ocean and Black Rock.