

## Mail from the French Shore of Newfoundland

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### French Shore

Although a part of the territory of the British colony of Newfoundland, the 'French Shore' of Newfoundland, was a seasonal fishing treaty concession granted to France. The French enjoyed landing and shore rights from April 15th through October 5th annually (Convention of 1857) and established numerous fishing stations, complete with permanent shore facilities. The fishing stations were located in many of the sheltered bays and harbours along stretches of the Newfoundland coast defined by treaty. French Navy vessels patrolled the French Shore in season, defending French rights and settling fishing disputes. The French Naval base in Newfoundland was at Croque Harbour, where a French Navy cemetery is maintained to this day. The French colony of St. Pierre and Miquelon also serviced the French fishing fleet and French Naval vessels when the British were not in control of the islands.

The various terms and on-shore geographical boundaries of the French Shore were contained in a number of agreements and treaties dating from 1713. The 1904 Anglo-French Convention terminated the French Shore concession when the French relinquished their shore rights but retained the island colony of St. Pierre and Miquelon. The French shore concession reverted wholly to the British Colony of Newfoundland in 1904. The consolidating of the territory allowed the British to create the self-governing Dominion of Newfoundland in 1907.



**Figure 1.** French Shore 1783-1904 by the Treaty of Versailles (1783) between Britain and France. Map by Tanya Saunders ©2001 Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Web Site, used with permission.

Petit-havre ou Petit-port, Anse à bois, baie du Gouverneur, Bonne-baie, Ingarnachoix, nouveau Port-aux-Choix, Anse de Barbacé, Ile Saint-Jean, Nouveau Férolle, Vieux-Férolle, baie Sainte-Barbe, pointe de l'Ancre, Anse aux Fleurs.

On the **East Coast of Newfoundland** the fishing stations were located at: baie de Haha, cap d'Oignon, baie aux Mauves, Le Kirpon, baie du Nord, les Criquets et le Cap-blanc, baie Saint-Lunaire, île Granchain, Petits-bréhats, Anse Verte, Grands-bréhats, baie Saint-Antoine, la Crémaillère, Anse à la soupe, Trois-montagnes, les Petites Oies, île de Fichot, havre du Four, les Petites-Ilettes, les Grandes-Ilettes, les Grandes Oies, Petits-Saints-Juliens, Grands-Saints-Juliens, îles des Saints-Juliens, le Croc, anse aux Millions, Belle-Île, anse du Pilier, cap-Rouge, la Conche, Boutitou, les Aiguillettes, les Canaries, Raincé, le Dégrat du Cheval, Sans Fond, Fourché, Orange, les Petites-Vaches, les Grandes-Vaches, la Fleur-de-Lys, la baie Verte, la baie des Pins, l'île-à-Bois, Pasquet, le Grand Coup de Hache, le Petit Coup de Hache, la Scie.

The French Shore postal history, inbound and some inbound, in the second treaty period, 1783 through 1904, is illustrated in this talk with a number of rare, mostly folded letters. The French Shore 1783-1904 (Figure 1), for convenience, can be divided into the West Coast and the East Coast along the axis of the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland.

The French fishing stations on the **West Coast of Newfoundland** were: Cod-Roy, Ile Rouge, Saint-Georges, Port-à-port,

Excellent map references for the French Shore are the charts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French naval hydrographic survey of Newfoundland coastal waters. A set of these maps resides in the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador and on their website (2008). By the late 1820s as many as nine thousand French Fisherman made the journey every summer to pursue the French Shore fishery. The fishery gradually declined late in the century until only 133 French fishermen showed up on the French Shore in 1898. The amount of fish landed by the French in 1903 was only ten per cent of what it had been twenty years earlier.

### **Saint Pierre and Miquelon**

On the south coast of Newfoundland, the island territory of St. Pierre and Miquelon changed hands back and forth between the French and English in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. St. Pierre and Miquelon reverted to full French control in 1816. Permanent French settlers returned to St. Pierre and Miquelon in 1816 and the French exercise full sovereignty over the territory to the present day.

### **Mail Routes**

The difficult and dangerous occupation of the French fisherman required them to be away from their families in France for seven or eight months at a time. Letters to and from home were very important. French naval guard vessels and the hospital ships of the charitable society *Oeuvres de Mer* delivered and accepted mail. One of the interesting aspects of the French Shore mail was that outward bound mail from a fishing station was passed to departing ship captains and may have travelled on one of several possible routes back to France. Of course the fortunate circumstance of a ship departing directly to France (*lettre confiée*) would be the quickest. These letters into France (*voie du commerce*) were placed in the French mailing system upon arrival at port. If an intermediate port was in England the mail was forwarded via the cross Channel route, usually through the French port of Calais. Less usual were entries through the port of Genoa, Italy.

Usually letters after 1840 were dispatched on ships that would make the connection with the English mail packets which regularly served Halifax, Nova Scotia or for certain periods St. John's, Newfoundland. Mail could also enter the British postal system at Sydney, Cape Breton Island where it went by postal boat to Halifax or later by railroad. Less common were connections to Europe through the port of Boston in the United States. In summary mail was routed via:

- 1) direct ship to France (where posted locally or handed over as a *lettre confiée*)
- 2) the French Colony of St. Pierre et Miquelon and onward
- 3) the British Colony of Newfoundland capital of St. John's, Newfoundland
- 4) Sydney, Cape Breton (CB), Nova Scotia (a British colony, confederated with the Dominion of Canada after 1867)
- 5) Halifax, Nova Scotia (a British colony, confederated with the Dominion of Canada after 1867)
- 6) indirect by ship ultimately to France (*voie du commerce*) by an indirect route but through England or Sardinia (Italy)
- 7) Boston, United States of America

### **Conclusions**

The French Shore of Newfoundland presents a fascinating area for postal history research. We imagine that many more of these covers sit in collections unrecognised as important historic documents and rare collectables. The known covers described in this exhibit tend to be from only certain fishing stations and from correspondence finds in a few destinations in north-west France. Early mail is very scarce and lacks the proliferation of 'in transit postal markings' that appeared from the late 1840s on. Many of the covers with the ship mail route markings of Sydney, Cape Breton, and Halifax, Nova Scotia and St. John's, Newfoundland command higher prices because of the demand from collectors of Canadian pre-stamp postmarks and ship mail.