

## Acadian Architecture in Port-Royal

by Brenda Dunn

Port-Royal has been called the cradle of Acadian civilization. French settlers established themselves at Port-Royal with Charles de Menou d'Aulnay in the 1630s, two decades after the demise of the 1605 Port-Royal Habitation. Settlement spread up and down the Annapolis River, where Acadians built their first dykes and adapted to life in the colony. The main settlement of Port-Royal (now Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia) continued, serving for most of the 17th century, and indeed until 1710, as the capital of Acadia, and from 1710 to 1749, renamed Annapolis Royal, as the capital of British Nova Scotia. In 1755 the government of Nova Scotia decided to deport the Acadians of the province after they refused to take an unconditional oath to the British Crown. In the former Port-Royal area, 1,664 Acadian men, women and children were placed aboard transport vessels and their homes destroyed. The dyked marshlands and one surviving pre-1710 house remain as the only visible reminder of almost 120 years of Acadian settlement.

Our knowledge of Acadian architecture in Port-Royal is limited, based only on sparse documentation and two archaeological excavations. There is some evidence of piquet or vertical log construction, a technique in which builders either drove the logs into the ground or stood them up in a builder's trench which was then backfilled. As in the rest of New France, the most common architectural form in Port-Royal seems to have been half-timber construction known as charpente or sometimes as colombage. Charpente construction consisted of heavy, hand-hewn timbers assembled with mortice and tenon joints held in place with wooden pegs. The frame consisted of sills, which usually rested on a foundation, wall plates, corner posts and uprights spaced along the walls. Most houses in 17th- and 18th-century rural Quebec and in the 18th-century fortress town of Louisbourg were of half-timber construction. Documentary and archaeological evidence indicate that half-timber construction was common in Port-Royal.

Noted as good axemen, Acadians seem to have constructed their own homes. Members of one family, the Gaudets, were specialists in charpente construction. When the French began construction of a new fort (now Fort Anne National Historic Site) in Port-Royal in 1702, they hired Pierre Gaudet to hew the timbers and to assemble the frames of the fort buildings. While on a visit to Louisbourg in 1714, two of his nephews, Denis and Bernard Gaudet, constructed a charpente house and storehouse on the waterfront for a couple who had previously lived in Port-Royal.

The Port-Royal area was well provided with construction materials. Builders took advantage of clay deposits to make bricks and tiles. Clay-rich mud and hay from the salt marshes were mixed together to form a bousillage to fill the space between the uprights in the half-timber houses. Chimneys were often wood-framed, covered with clay to make them fireproof. Local grasses provided thatch for roofs. While Louisbourg had to import boards from Boston, sawmills at Port-Royal turned out lumber of all sizes as early as the 1680s. The one important material unavailable at Port-Royal was limestone, the nearest source being across the Bay of Fundy, at the mouth of the St. John River. Clay served as a substitute for lime, used, for example, instead of lime mortar in stone foundations. White clay served as a plaster wall finish.

When the French engineer Pierre-Paul Delabat arrived to design and build the new fort in 1702, he made a study of local half-timber buildings in the Port-Royal area. He was struck by the impermanence of the Acadian buildings, which he claimed often did not have foundations but sat directly on the ground. Delabat claimed that Acadians renewed the frames of their buildings every 12 to 14 years, or at least every 20 years. He complained that they used unseasoned wood, which caused the framing to crack and the joints to work, opening up the house to the weather. He also criticized the size and placement of the mortice and tenon joints in the framing. According to Delabat, the interiors were usually finished with panelling (lambrissage), possibly only boards, which he considered a waste of wood and nails. He noted the common use of cellars in Acadian houses, a detail documented elsewhere. His are the only contemporary comments on Acadian charpente construction.

Construction of the Delabat fort resulted in the destruction of four 17th-century Acadian houses. Major Claude-Sébastien de Villieu lost a house as well as a separate kitchen building and a stable. The four houses were close in size, measuring about 9.8 metres by 7.2 metres. A disgruntled official who believed that the evaluation of one house, owned by mill owner Louis Allain, was too high, described it as "an old house, 28 pieds long and 22 pieds wide,<sup>1</sup> with a board roof, revetted (on the outside) with half-rotten four-inch planks, with a mud chimney, a very poor floor on ground floor level, a partition of plain boards and two cabinets formed from boards that are not tongue and groove." Cabinets were smaller rooms subdivided from a principal room or chambre by single board partitions which could be easily moved or dismantled.

Major de Villieu purchased another house, in the centre of town, which was 46 pieds by 24 pieds and consisted of "a kitchen, a parlour and five cabinets with a cellar underneath." Described as "a house of brick and wood," it may have been a frame building with brick fill. Such a house would have been unusual; Villieu's critics accused him of building his house with bricks and lime intended for the new fort.

As the capital of Acadia, the town of Port-Royal was home to the garrison and to civil servants between 1701 and 1710. The civil servants came from France while most officers in the *compagnies franches de la marine* were from either France or Quebec. While the governor used government labour and materials to build a *maison de plaisance* in town, others probably employed Acadian contractors to build their homes. The newcomers may have brought new architectural styles with them, giving the early 18th-century town an appearance unlike the Acadian houses in the farming settlements along the river. The only surviving building is a mansard-roofed house built in 1708 for Major Louis de Gannes de Falaise of the garrison. The house combines an architectural style fashionable in Quebec in the late 17th century, when de Falaise was in the garrison there, with the Acadian use of clay and mud wall fill.

## Archaeology

Archaeological excavations carried out on two Acadian settlement sites on the north shore of the Annapolis River in the 1980s provided important details on Acadian buildings in the former Port-Royal area. Both excavations revealed a succession of buildings constructed one over the other, on the same house site. Architectural details from the excavations, along with contemporary documentation, formed the basis for a model of an Acadian village at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull.

In 1983, David Christianson, now curator of archaeology, excavated one house site and part of another at Belleisle for the Nova Scotia Museum. Located halfway between present-day Annapolis Royal and Bridgetown, overlooking the massive Belleisle marsh, Belleisle was the largest Acadian village on the upper river before the 1755 Deportation of the Acadians, with 20 to 30 houses. Its families included the Blanchards, the Gaudets and others.

In the summers of 1984, 1985 and 1986, Andrée Crépeau, senior archaeologist at the Fortress of Louisbourg, excavated one house site and tested two others in the Melanson Settlement, an Acadian family settlement on the lower Annapolis River, just above Goat Island at the entrance to the river. Founded by Charles Melanson and Marie Dugas in about 1664, the settlement grew to about 12 households by the time of the Deportation. Eight of the Melansons' 14 children established households in the family settlement. The Melanson Settlement was declared of national historic significance in 1986 because of its important archaeological resources.

The Belleisle excavations uncovered evidence of two half-timber houses, built one after the other on the same foundation. The Acadian builders had placed tamped clay over the remains of the first house, which had burned, and immediately began construction of its replacement. The first house, which dated from the late 17th century, measured 11.5 metres by 7.5 metres, including a small extension on the east end. Evidence suggests that the house was *pièce sur pièce*, a type of charpente construction with horizontal log fill, and had an interior layer of clay and marsh hay, finished with a slipped white clay. During the excavation, blackened bundles of thatch made from local marsh hay were found along the front and back

walls of the house. The most remarkable feature of the house was a fireplace/oven complex, located on the west end wall. The oven was built against the outside wall on a stone foundation 2.5 metres in diameter. Locally produced clay bricks seem to have been used to line the fireplace while local blue slate tiles served as hearth tiles.

At the Melanson Settlement, Ms. Crépeau excavated one house site, believed to be the house of the Melansons' eldest son, Charles fils, and his wife Anne Bourg. The excavations revealed a succession of four structures built on the same site. The first two were piquet or earth fast buildings, with walls of vertical posts driven into the ground. Their discovery provides the first definite evidence of piquet construction in Acadia. The third and fourth buildings were half-timber with wall in-fill of clay and chopped marsh grass. As at Belleisle, a layer of tamped clay had been spread to prepare the site for the second half-timber house. The two charpente houses reflect a variation in construction techniques. Instead of being attached to the sill of the house frame, the floor beams of the first house rested on the ground. The second frame house had an interrupted sill, consisting of several short pieces that ran between the uprights which fitted into pockets in the stone foundation.

Like the Belleisle house, the half-timber houses had a fireplace and exterior oven on the west end wall. The oven complex from the first half-timber house had been reused, in a modified form, in the second one. The fireplace had a slate and fieldstone hearth. The floor of the oven was made of unfired clay tiles, bedded in clay, over a plank base. The Melansons' oven did not have a masonry base like the one at Belleisle but seems to have been built on a wooden platform. Acadians in the Port-Royal area obviously varied their construction techniques.

Limited amounts of window glass were found in the two excavations. The first of the two half-timber houses at the Melanson Settlement had lead-camed windows. Lead-caming stamped with the date 1740 was found in the excavations. In 1701, a house in the main settlement of Port-Royal, near the fort, had been described as having paper windows.

The rest of the archaeological features at Belleisle and the Melanson Settlement remain unexcavated. Among the intriguing features at the Settlement are large and small circular mounds which appear to be the remains of round buildings with substantial fieldstone foundations. One of the large features, which measure from 5.5 to 6.5 metres in diameter, is believed to be a windmill, used by the Acadians to grind their grain. The feature stands on the high point of the settlement, exposed to the steady breeze that blows downriver from the river entrance. There is also a probable windmill site at Belleisle just waiting to be excavated. We look forward then, with great anticipation, to the results of future archaeological digs, which will surely teach us much more about Acadian houses and the ancillary buildings of Acadian farms.

## Sources

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1. Pied, an old measuring unit, 0.324 metres in length.

