

The Early Days of the Lobster Fishery in Atlantic Canada

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A piece of misinformation, often repeated, is that lobsters were generally not eaten by the early settlers in the Atlantic region. According to what is said, the Europeans who first came to our Atlantic shores considered lobsters and other shellfish to be exclusively "poor people's food," something one consumed only when on the brink of starvation. Greater familiarity with extant evidence undermined my faith in that simplistic lobster-scorning theory. Now I believe I have enough material to set the record straight concerning the consumption of lobsters in colonial times.

The Early Explorers

Anyone who has ever read a sixteenth or seventeenth century New World travel account has undoubtedly been struck by the European descriptions of the quantity and quality of the fish they encountered in North American waters. Though the focus of such remarks was usually on offshore species such as cod, there were nonetheless more than a few early travellers who also commented on (and obviously sampled) inshore shellfish, like lobster.

One early reference to the European appreciation for the abundance of New World lobsters comes from an English mariner named Captain Leigh, who sailed through Atlantic waters in 1597. In his journal entry for Cibo (Sydney, Nova Scotia), Captain Leigh wrote that "In this place are the greatest multitude of lobsters that ever we heard of; for we caught at one hawle with a little draw net above 140."¹ A little over a decade later, between 1610 and 1613, Parisian lawyer, historian and poet Marc Lescarbot described the variety of fish and shellfish that could be harvested at Port-Royal. With specific regard to shellfish, Lescarbot wrote: "there is an abundance of lobsters, crabs, palourdes, cockles, mussels, snails, and porpoises."² A few years later, Jesuit Father Pierre Biard related the story of a few sailors who were without food, but who remained confident that "God would be merciful to them; and, as a superabundance of grace, they had great success in catching large Lobsters or Sea crabs."³ That Europeans recognized (and knew how to catch and cook) lobsters should really be no surprise. Since Roman times they had been harvesting, especially along the Mediterranean coast, lobsters and other types of shellfish using nets and oblong or cone-shaped baskets called *nasses*.⁴

Meanwhile, on the shores of the New World, explorers and settlers continued to comment on (and presumably eat) lobsters throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nicolas Denys, for one, mentioned the availability of lobsters in no fewer than six different harbours in his detailed book, *Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North America...* (1672). To cite just one of those entries, Denys wrote:

There are also taken lobsters [Hommars] which are crayfishes of the sea. There are some of them seen which have claw or snapper so large that it will hold a pint of wine. They are taken on the coast around the rocks. They come in the spring and remain until winter. They are taken with the same iron as Flounders. It is very good eating with all kinds of sauce. We have named them Sea partridges on account of their goodness.⁵

Denys' reference to catching lobsters with an "iron," the same as with "Flounders," merits a word of explanation as this would seem to be at odds with traditional European approaches using nets or pots. Denys himself describes the iron in question in his section on flounder as "a shaft with an iron pointed at the end, having a little tooth which keeps it from coming out when the fish is struck." The use of such a device shows how plentiful lobsters were at the time, as the bottom-scuttling crustaceans could only be speared in relatively shallow water. The use of the iron by the French may also show something of a Micmac influence. The native people of the region made frequent use of spears and harpoons when they were fishing, and the French might have adopted a practice that to them appeared to work well. It is also worth mentioning, in passing, that the Micmacs also caught lobsters. They sometimes used the cleaned and polished lobster claws as tobacco pouches and even as pipes. Similarly, it seems that the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland also enjoyed lobsters, judging by an early nineteenth-century illustration of them drying lobster tails along with salmon, seals, and other food sources.⁶

The Eighteenth Century

Both the French and the English in the New World consumed lobsters (and other shell fish such as oysters, mussels and so on) during the

eighteenth century. A few examples, from each culture, should suffice.

In 1716, Louis Chancels de Lagrange, a French naval officer visiting the newly-settled colony of Île Royale (Cape Breton), commented that "in addition to the fishery for cod, mackerel and lobsters, which resemble prodigious crayfish, a quantity of oysters are taken in this port." It is not clear whether or not Lagrange himself tasted lobsters, for he described its "flesh" as being "not highly prized" because the animal was a scavenger. Yet he did mention seeing an empty claw which was large enough to hold an entire *chopine* (half litre) of liquid.⁷

In 1729, 13 years after Lagrange's comments, French military officer Jean-François Eurry de la Perelle drew up a lengthy memorandum on the climate and resources of the island. After typically describing the importance of the cod fishery, de la Perelle listed all the other fish that were eaten (salmon, trout, halibut, and so on). He went on to state that there was an "infinity of other fish and sea monsters" that were also edible, such as seals, sea cows and sharks. De la Perelle continued: "as for shellfish, one finds there very good oysters, mussels, clams, *chancres*, lobsters and sea urchins."⁸ Yet another reference to lobsters being eaten by the French during the Île Royale period came from governor's secretary (and later traitor) Thomas Pichon. Pichon lived on Cape Breton during the 1750s, and in his subsequent book on the history and natural history of the island he listed lobsters among the many fish and shellfish that were enjoyed by the inhabitants. Clams, oysters and mussels were also mentioned.⁹

It should be noted that none of the authors cited above could by any stretch of the imagination be described as being from the lower or poorer *couches* of New World society. They were either the leaders or middle level figures, and most of them, Lagrange excepted, expressed no particular contempt for lobsters. The meaty crustacean seems to have formed at least part of the normal colonial diet.

Turning from documentary to archaeological sources at this point, we find evidence of lobsters being consumed at the French settlements of Placentia (a seventeenth-century Newfoundland fishing base) and Louisbourg (French occupation, 1713-58). Though shells usually decompose relatively quickly after being discarded and/or buried, a few lobster shells did turn up in excavations at both Placentia and Louisbourg, in historical contexts.¹⁰

Turning to the English-settled American colonies for a moment, one also finds references there to lobsters being caught in abundance.¹¹ Indeed, there are even tales of lobsters five and six feet long being harvested in New York Bay. Just imagine the cooking pot! When the American colonists came into what are now Atlantic Canadian waters they brought their appetites for lobsters with them. The New Englanders who besieged the fortress at Louisbourg in 1745 occasionally found time away from their assault to look for lobsters along the coast. A siege journal kept by New Englander Benjamin Cleaves has the following entries:

[May 28] Caught some lobsters in the morning.

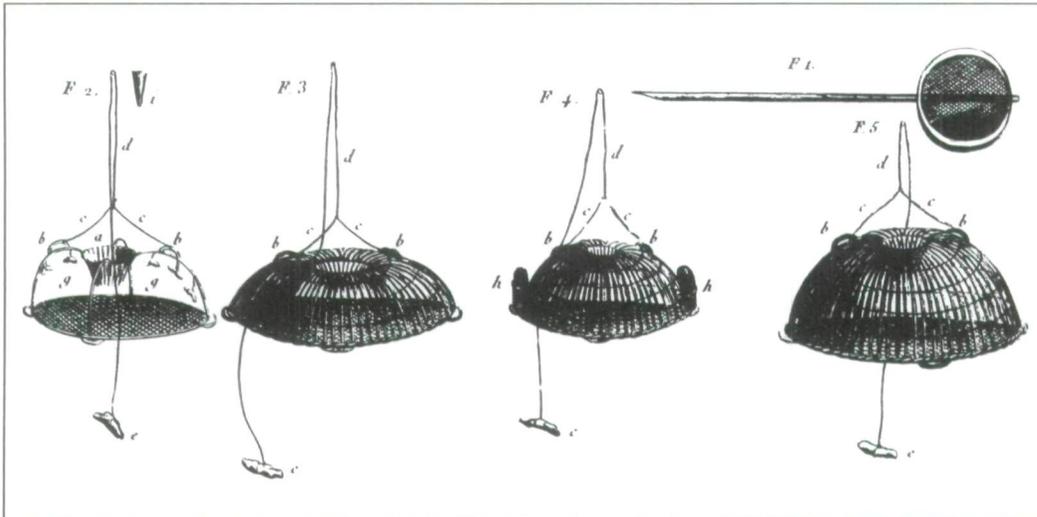
[May 30] Some of our men went a fishing about 2 mile; Caught 6 Troutts. Our men went to catch lobsters; caught 30.¹²

Though Benjamin Cleaves does not say how the New England soldiers cooked their lobsters, they probably did so in the simplest manner possible, boiling and eating them straight from the shell. According to two historians of the food of Quebec, however, under different conditions English culinary tastes could be more refined, using lobsters and other shellfish in delightful sauces:

As early as the seventeenth century, the English commonly used shellfish, lobsters, shrimps and mussels in preparing sauces to accompany fish. Lobster sauce, seasoned with cayenne pepper was considered to be one of the delicacies of British cuisine in the eighteenth century. By 1789, pickled lobster was being imported to Quebec City and was undoubtedly used to prepare this sauce. In fact, at that time, the English loved to use lobster...in preparing sauces as a preserve, or combined with butter for sandwiches.¹³

The Lobster Fishery in France

One of the best sources on eighteenth-century French fishing activities is Charles Duhamel Du Monceau's detailed study *Traité général des pesches, et histoires des poissons...* Du Monceau's book concentrates on the many commercial fisheries of the era, examined topically and then region by region all along the coasts of France. In various areas, but especially along the Normandy coastline, Duhamel Du Monceau writes about the lobster fishery. He describes the season as being from 15 April to the end of October, with the best catches being made in rocky coastal areas. The stretch



◀ **Fig. 1**
Eighteenth-century
French lobster traps,
known as bouragues.
(Duhamel Du Monceau,
Traité général des
pesches)

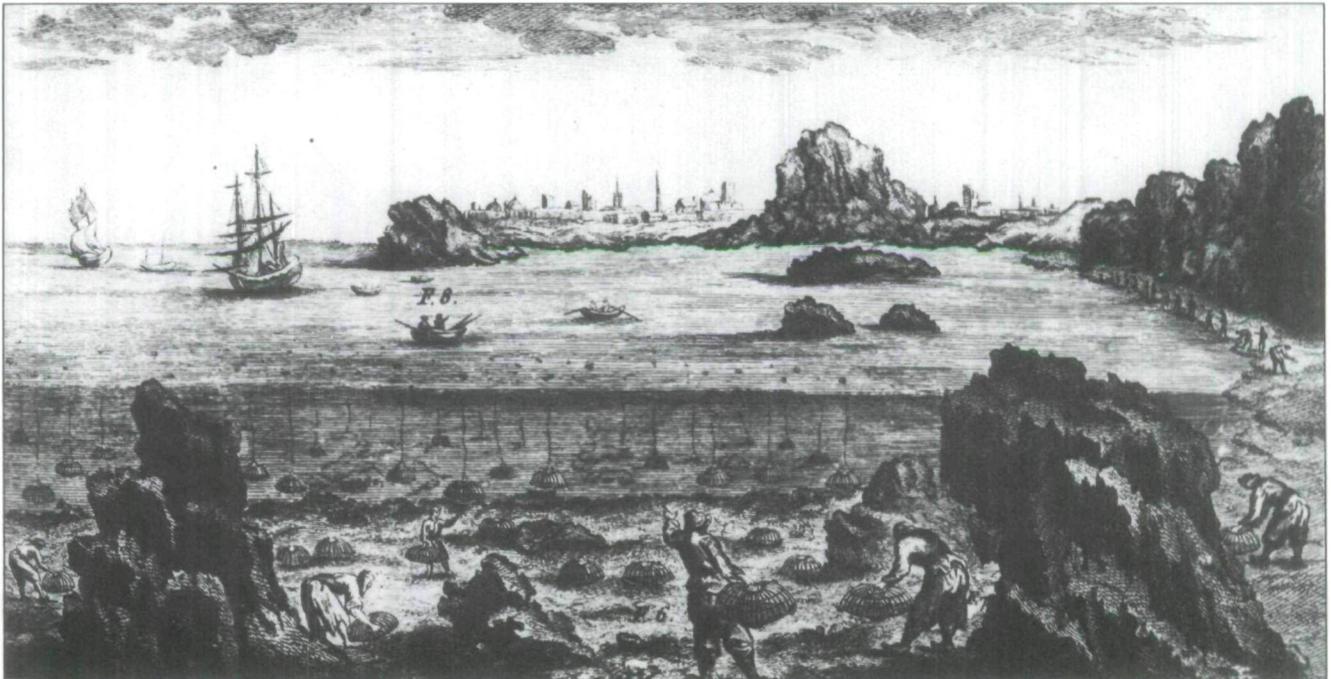
of coast between Bayeaux and Cap de la Hogue (a point of land just west of Cherbourg) is mentioned as the best of all regions for lobsters.¹⁴

Duhamel Du Monceau described and illustrated the traps of the era which were generally known as *bouragues* (though some Normans called them *boutiques*). These *bouragues* came in different sizes, with the largest being a *piéd* and a half high and four *piéd*s in diameter. Made of osier (a type of willow used in basket-work), these traps or cages had an opening in the top and stone weights to keep them on the bottom. There were two ways to put them in place to catch bottom-crawling crustaceans.

One was simply to walk out at low tide and set them down. The other way was to take the *bouragues* out in small boats, attach them to lines, and lower them to the ocean bottom 15 or 20 fathoms below. Whichever method was used, Du Monceau states that the cages were checked twice a day, presumably at low tide.

Once the lobsters were caught by French fishermen they were then kept alive in wicker cages submerged along the shore or beside a wharf. Duhamel Du Monceau called these holding areas “*parcs de clayonnage*.” The lobsters were kept in these “*parcs*” until they were sold. Such sales were often made, it would seem, in rather large “wholesale” deals.

Fig. 2
Eighteenth-century
French lobster fishery.
Traps were placed on
foot at low tide, and
also descended from
lines by men in boats.
(Du Monceau, Traité
général des pesches)



Du Monceau writes of French and especially English vessels in the 25 to 30 ton range purchasing the live lobsters. The crustaceans were then transported to waiting markets (elsewhere in France or across the channel to England) in boats, which either had a tank or box filled with salt water, or else were constructed with two hulls allowing the free flow of water in the boat to keep the lobsters alive.

While there is no evidence I know of for a commercial lobster fishery like the one described by Duhamel Du Monceau ever springing up in the New World—that is, before the nineteenth century—mid eighteenth-century Swedish traveller Pehr Kalm did mention a commercial crayfish industry having existed in Canada in the seventeenth century. Indeed, Kalm states that once prevalent crayfish had been virtually wiped out by over-fishing.¹⁵ Atlantic Canada may not have witnessed similar large-scale commercial fishing of its crustaceans, but it would be astonishing if the French fishermen who were familiar with lobster fishing techniques back in France had not carried that knowledge with them across the ocean and used those methods accordingly. Indeed, when one looks at the places of origin of many of the French settlers in Atlantic Canada, especially among the fishing population, one sees that a significant number were from coastal areas in Normandy and Brittany.¹⁶

The Eating of Lobsters

Given the evidence of lobster fishing in coastal France, of lobster markets in England, and of the harvesting of lobsters by Europeans in the New World, one is left wondering where the opinion ever arose that lobsters were rarely eaten in colonial days, and then only by poor people.

Lagrange's comment in 1716 about lobster meat being "not highly prized" because the crustacean was a scavenger is one piece of evidence. The only other damning comment—so to speak—would seem to be G. A. Rawlyk's remark in *Yankees at Louisbourg* to the effect that in 1744, "since the middle of April these unfortunates [some of the fishing population of Louisbourg] had been on the verge of starvation, eating little else than shell fish."¹⁷ Just for the record, the evidence upon which the historian Rawlyk based this sentence actually comes from a comment in a report written by

Governor Duquesnel and Commissaire-ordonnateur Bigot on the precarious situation in Louisbourg in May 1744, when food supplies were extremely low. The original remark is as follows:

une partie des habitants des pêcheurs ne vivent depuis trois semaines ou un mois, que de coquillage; ils n'ont seulement pas de ligne pour pêcher de la morue...¹⁸

Over the years some people have read a great deal more into this remark (or Rawlyk's synopsis of it) than is actually there. They have deduced that it implied a value judgement on lobsters and other *coquillages*. They concluded that shellfish were something that no eighteenth-century person of good taste would eat unless they were absolutely forced to. The broader evidence, which I have summarized above, doesn't support that interpretation. What Duquesnel and Bigot were saying was simply that provisions were extremely low in Louisbourg in the spring of 1744, the Basque fishermen had not come out with early supplies as they usually did, and that some people were surviving only on what they could easily harvest from the sea. There was no value judgement against lobsters and other shellfish; it was just a statement of fact.

There is one final note about lobsters. That is, that the fiery red (in other words, cooked) lobster was also deemed to be a subject fit for inclusion in European still-life compositions of the early modern era. Artists such as Jan Davidsz. de Heem (1606–84), Willem Kalf (1622–93), and Anne Vallayer-Coster (1744–1818) depicted lobsters on their canvasses along with grapes and other signs of plenty.¹⁹ Had the crustaceans been scorned as nothing more than starvation food for the lower classes, they would not have been included in such contexts.

In conclusion, it seems clear to me that the available evidence supports the contention that lobsters were eaten and enjoyed by Europeans in Atlantic Canada during the colonial period. Though an extensive commercial lobster fishery does not seem to have developed, what lobsters and other shellfish were harvested would undoubtedly have had no trouble making their way to the table. And some of those tables would most likely have been among the finest in the colonies.

NOTES

The author would like to thank Anne O'Neill, Alex Storm, Andr e Cr peau, Charles Burke, Ken Donovan, and Hope Duntton for their suggestions and assistance in preparing this article.

1. Richard Brown, *A History of the Island of Cape Breton with Some Account of the Discovery of Canada, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland* (London: Sampson Low, Son and Marstow, 1869), 44.
2. Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents...* (New York: Pageant Book Co., 1959), 1: 69.
3. *Ibid.*, 4: 25.
4. David Attenborough, *The First Eden, The Mediterranean World and Man* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1987), 19, 200, and the illustration and caption on page 97. For the lobster fishery of more recent years in Mediterranean waters see Roger Miniconi, "P cheurs de Corse," *Le Chasse-Mar e* no. 50 (juillet 1990), 2-17.
5. William F. Ganong, ed., *Denys: Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North America (Acadia)* [1672] (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 356.
6. *Ibid.* The flounder "iron" is described on p. 355, the Micmac use of harpoons on pp. 436-7, and the use of lobster claws as tobacco holders or as pipes on pp. 424-5. On the Beothuk eating of lobsters, see the illustrations, p. 22, *The Spirit Sings, Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart and the Glenbow Museum, 1987) which show lobster tails drying, ca 1827-9.
7. L.-A. Vigneras, ed., "L'Isle Royale en 1716," *Revue d'histoire de l'Am rique fran aise* 13, no. 3 (d cembre 1959), 122-34. Author's translation.
8. France, Archives Nationales (AN), S rie C11C, Vol. 9, fol. 30.
9. Thomas Pichon, *Lettres et m moires pour servir   l'histoire naturelle, civile et politique du Cap Breton, depuis son  tablissement jusqu'  la reprise de cette isle par les Anglois en 1758* (The Hague: P. Gosse, 1760), 88.
10. Roger T. Grange, *Excavations at Castle Hill* (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1971) Manuscript Report no. 46, 950-52; Pierre Beaudet, *Excavations at the Fortress of Louisbourg of the De Pensens-De la Valli re Storehouse and New England Craftsman's Shop, Lot D, Block 16, and of the Loppinot-Dangeac House and Property, Lot C, Block 16* (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1977), Manuscript Report no. 382, 70.
11. Alice Morse Earle, *Home Life in Colonial Days* (Stockbridge: The Berkshire Traveller Press, ca 1974), 117-8.
12. Benjamin Cleaves, "Journal of the Expedition to Louisbourg, 1745," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 66, (April, 1912).
13. Marc Lafrance and Yvon Desloges, *A Taste of History: The Origins of Quebec's Gastronomy* (Qu bec: Canadian Parks Service and Les  ditions de la Cheneli re Inc., 1989), 76.
14. Duhamel Du Monceau, *Trait  g n ral des pesches, et histoires des poissons qu'elles fournissent, tant pour la subsistance des hommes que pour plusieurs autre usages qui ont rapport aux arts et au commerce* (Paris: Saillant S Nyon, Desaint, 1769-77) Sect. II, Chap. II, pp. 36-7; Sect. III, Chap. I, p. 66.
15. Lafrance and Desloges, *A Taste of History*, 47.
16. For data on the provincial origins of early French settlers in Atlantic Canada, see A. H. Clark, *Acadia, The Geography of Early Nova Scotia to 1760* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 399; Marcel Trudel, *Introduction to New France* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 133; and A. J. B. Johnston, "The Fishermen of Eighteenth-Century Cape Breton: Numbers and Origins" *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 9, no. 1 (1989): 62-72.
17. G. A. Rawlyk, *Yankees at Louisbourg* (Orono: University of Maine Press, 1967), 1.
18. AN, Colonies, Serie C11B, Vol. 26, fol. 3-3v, 9 mai 1744.
19. Marianne Roland Michel, *Anne Vallayer-Coster, 1744-1818* (Paris: Comptoir international du livre, 1970), 8-9; Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London: Fontana Press, 1988), 160; and *Toledo Museum of Art: European Paintings* (Toledo: The Museum, University Park, 1976), 263.