

Bandits at Five O'Clock

It began innocuously enough. A few items missing overnight from the supply tent. Strange choices; drafting paste, cookies, once a plumb bob and its string. We all figured that local kids were curious about the excavations and, not daring to cross the fence, had raided the less protected tent. The crew became concerned when coins and faunal specimens left overnight in the exposed vertical soil profiles began to disappear. There were no breaks in the perimeter fence, and no tracks in the soft sandy loam of the excavation units.

The excavations at Fort Pentag et were entering their third season when I joined the crew in the summer of 1984¹. It seems that the Puritans who sailed the *Mayflower* into Plymouth harbor had not paid the mortgage on that ship. In 1629 Plymouth Colony had set up a post to trade with the Native Americans at the mouth of the Penobscot River at present-day Castine, Maine, in an effort to raise the necessary capital. By 1635, the Acadian frontier was already in the hands of the French, and Fort Pentag et was built in that year

1 Throughout this essay I have augmented my own memories with frequent reference to Faulkner and Faulkner 1987, the published site report resulting from our excavations. Any errors in fact are my responsibility.

on the site of Plymouth Colony's old trading post. Nineteen years later, the fort (along with the rest of Acadia) was taken back by the English under orders from Cromwell. The fort was given back to the French in 1667, as one of the conditions of the Treaty of Breda. This time the French held the fort for seven years, during which time it served as the capital of Acadia. So, over the course of the 17th century, the fort was successively claimed by first the English, then the French, then the English, then the French, and finally by the Dutch (yes, the Dutch). In the Year of Our Lord 1674 a Dutch raiding party successfully attacked the fort, and in a fit of international diplomacy turned the fort's own cannon around and blew the curtain walls clear into the courtyard.

Three hundred and ten years later, it was our privilege to dismantle the three feet of stone rubble left by those walls, abusing our shovels and trowels until the necessary crowbars were purchased. I was too green to have yet learned my usual trick of striding across the site with a hardhat and tweeds and a roll of drawings, so I had to wield a crowbar and shovel with the rest. My first impressions of the site featured blackflies, the rains of late May, a crew reciting old Monty Python comedy routines to one another, that strange brake-fluid viscosity of DEET insect repellent, the smell of damp balsam pines, and more blackflies.

Castine is a pleasure port, and throughout the summer, we would all halt work and lean on our shovels as one of the old schooners would come ghosting into harbor, the shouted orders to the crew rumbling across the surf. We promised each other that we would bribe our way aboard one evening with a couple of six-packs of Guinness, take over the tiller and make for international waters. Somehow we never made it past the Guinness.

When I signed on for the dig at Castine, I had not yet decided to pursue a graduate degree. I can tell you the precise moment of that decision. We were now

one course of stone rubble from the original living surface of the inner courtyard of the fort, and had traded our crowbars for more meticulous tools. I was prying at some damned ornery rock when my trowel was deflected, making a dull thump instead of a clanging ring. I had found a void. We called the director over, and as I pulled, our faces instinctively jerked back at the sudden smell. The void had trapped a pocket of air, and a sharp, stinging 300-year-old odor of burnt black powder wafted across the site. For the entire crew, an abstract violence had now become real, and the remainder of the summer was spent unraveling the details of that final implosion from the last moments of Fort Pentagoet.

Just a few vignettes: Brass cauldrons, meticulously repaired with scraps of sheet metal after years of use on a remote frontier. A tiny silver finial, ornamented in a frenzy of baroque curves, all that remained of the dreaded communion silver of the Catholic French. A gray chert gunflint mined from English cliffs, partially reworked by Native hands into an effective arrowhead, turning a newly-introduced technology against itself. A cannonball had ripped a hole in the oak floor of a barracks structure, the wood charred from its heat where the ball came to rest. The iron pintles upon which the main gates once swung had been torqued inwards by the force of the cannon fire; pieces of the gates themselves were collected twenty yards away in the interior parade ground. I spent a week excavating the interior of French Commandant Charles d'Aulnay's tiny house. A fireplace mantel had fallen forward into the room when the curtain wall was hit. We recovered four ceramic churchwarden tobacco pipes from the floor, their long stems and tiny 17th century belly-bowls miraculously intact. The pipes were found lying next to a dark soil stain of biodegrade tobacco - each exactly as it had fallen from the mantelpiece, protected by a layer of roofing thatch from the tons of overlying rock.

And then there was the mystery of the purloined coins. Only three coins were recovered from three seasons of excavations, including two copper *double tournois*, one dated 1642, the other illegible but dating from between 1610-1643. The third coin was an Islamic *dam* from the reign of Aurangzeb of Surat, last of the Mogul shahs. The coin served as a reminder of the far-flung French colonial empire and its varied military postings in the 17th century. All of the coins were probably used at the fort as gaming pieces rather than as currency. You might think that coins would be critical for the dating of soil strata encountered on the site, and on most sites you would be correct. But we already knew the dates for every period of occupation, and the soil sequence was relatively straightforward. Besides, in the 17th century a coin might be minted to a single date and design for several years, rendering it little more useful for fine-grained dating than a fashionable ceramic pot, or the shape of an axe head.

Our director was nonetheless angered by the repeated overnight vandalism, and began losing what little hair he had left. Among ourselves we would later score him on the shade of red he turned when reviewing the morning carnage. He broke with archaeological tradition and began drawing daily soil profiles, so that we could pull the artifacts exposed in profile each night. The depredations did not end. Instead, there arose among the crew a kind of arched-eyebrow respect for our bandit. Some of the women began to leave scraps of their lunch in the supply tent, and shouted and whooped when the scraps were gone in the morning.

About mid-season the inevitable happened. We had arrived early on site, clanking tools muffled by the fog still rising off the bay and the dew soaking through the toes of our boots. Being by and large a younger crowd, we were boisterous in the mornings, and almost missed the movement of the tent flap. She was obviously nursing, her teats dragging as she bent over

her loot. She somehow managed to look dignified and mildly offended by our laughing and baby-talk cajoling, but she never dropped her end of the tube of Saltines dragging between her legs as she scrambled across the site with that waddling gallop adopted by raccoons in a hurry. None of us had the presence of mind to try and follow her, and we heard all about our oversight in bloody detail when the director learned of our encounter.

The summer wore on. The fireflies had come and gone, various crew members had flirted, dated, and broken up. We all had hangover stories. A buddy and I got caught by the Maine Maritime Patrol for crossing the bay in an open canoe without flotation. We had heard that the blueberries were particularly good on a certain island. Years later we attended each others' weddings.

We were cleaning up at the end of the day on my last week on the dig, our afternoon torpor gone with the five o'clock church bells. We were covering the open excavation units with sheet plastic and weighing down the corners with rocks. The usual banter stopped at one end of the fort, and silence swept across the site until we were all craning our heads to see. After a summer of raids she had decided to trust us. She gave us a parade; four little bandit replicas ambling behind her in a line, beady little masked eyes looking from side to side like kids in a candy store. She got to the far edge of the site, looked over her shoulder, and took off into the trees. No one ran after her, not even the director.

We never did recover the coins.

Faulkner, Alaric and Gretchen Faulkner
1987 *The French at Pentagoet 1635-1674: An
Archaeological Portrait of the Acadian Frontier.* New
Brunswick Museum and the Maine Historic Preservation
Commission.

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