

BELLE ISLE MARSH, CRADLE OF ACADIA

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CHURCH POINT, NS: Located eleven kilometers upstream from Annapolis Royal, the Belle Isle marsh, home of the first Acadians, spans an area of 700 hectares and now enjoys the protection by the government of Nova Scotia.

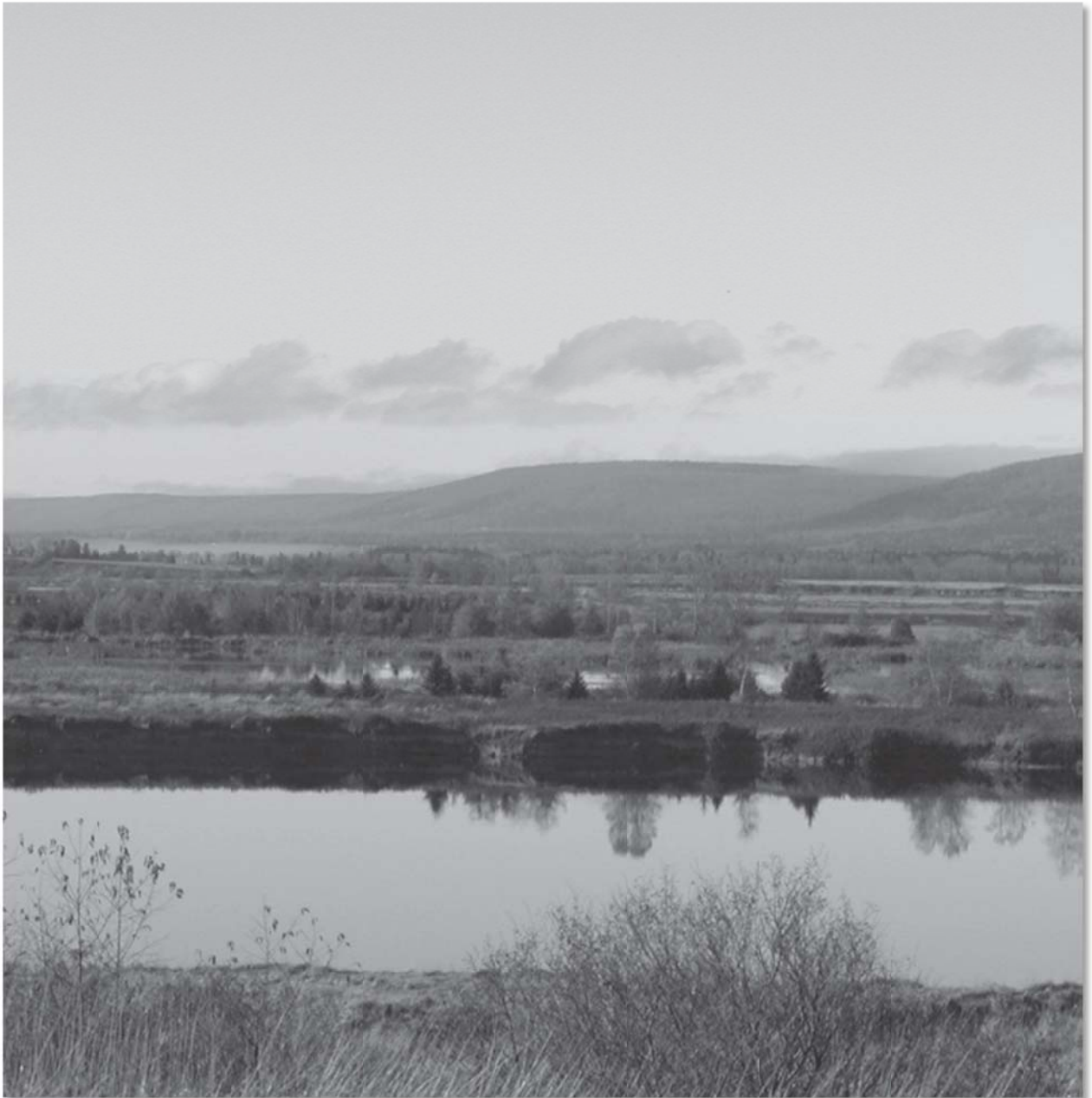
Marc Lavoie, an archaeologist and Professor at the Université Sainte-Anne explains that the historical documents of the Acadians that lived in the Belle Isle Marsh are somewhat rare and there are many gaps in the information that is available.



Field class at Université Sainte-Anne in 2005. Students uncover the remains of two large Acadian homes which were occupied during the first decades of the 18th century. (Photo : Courtoisie Marc Lavoie)

It was towards the end of 1960 that archaeologists and historians began to look at the Belle Isle marsh site to try to find traces of the Acadians who were there before the Deportation. In 1970, Brian Preston, archaeologist for the province, began excavations in Greater Annapolis Royal and believed that the remains that were discovered there were those of the Acadians. Excavations made in the next year confirmed these assumptions. From the 1980s, more detailed and precise excavations were undertaken. These digs allowed a much better understanding of the Acadian settlement in the region. "Thanks to archeology, we were able to understand the customs of the Acadians, their economic status, and many other related aspects " reports Mr. Lavoie. " The site is very old and we now know that the Acadians were already established in that location by 1650."

Marc Lavoie explains that the history of this region is very special. In this period, the land belonged to the Lords ('Seigneurs'). But written documents show that from 1654, the inhabitants



of the marshes began to buy Crown land from a certain Jeanne Motin-LaTour¹. This allowed Acadian families to become fully autonomous in the 17th century, which was rare for the period. These families demonstrated their ingenuity and their skills to drain the swamps by building dikes and then developing agriculture. The Acadians lived very well. They regularly traded their surplus harvest with New England for commodities, food, and other property that they did not produce themselves. In the 18th century, Belle Isle had become large enough to become a parish; the Saint Laurent Parish. From the few documents that were written in the 18th century, burial records from 1707 of the cemetery of Saint Laurent were found. Archaeologists believe that at this time thirty Acadian families inhabited the marshes of Belle Isle. They were able to retain their autonomy until 1755.

So, the marsh of Belle Isle is a site that is rich in history. Archaeologists have even discovered that the first-born Acadian, Mathieu Martin, saw his first days at the west end of the Belle Isle Marsh in 1636 or 1637. "Archaeology helps us a lot and the picture that we are now able to draw is very interesting," says Marc Lavoie. "The ruins of the Acadian houses were never touched after the homes were destroyed between November or December 1755."

Currently, Acadians Robert and Diane Surette are the only ones to live on the site. It was only after they purchased the land on the marsh that they found that the land was the land of their ancestors. Afterward, they took measures to safeguard the Marsh.

Since the 2000s, we started to think about preserving the archaeological sites in the marsh. Unfortunately, other activities took place which damaged or destroyed some of the sites. The Committee on Development of Belle Isle Marsh for which Marc Lavoie is working for the preservation and enhancement of the archaeological remains of the site. The hard work of this committee led to the protection of the marsh by the Government of Nova Scotia whose announcement was made on 25 October (the *Courier de la Nouvelle Écosse*, October 29, 2010). Currently, a quarter of the marsh is protected. "Belle Isle Marsh is an extremely important place for the Acadians, it is the cradle of Acadia," concludes Marc Lavoie. This is where the French adapted and changed to become Acadians. Marc is now expected to establish a committee for the management of wetlands and thus ensure its full protection for the long term. ~

¹ Ed: Jeanne Motin was first, the wife of Lord Charles de Menou d'Aulnay who worked with Isaac de Razilly (Governor of Acadia) to organize and manage the colony of Port Royal. When Razilly died in 1635, d'Aulnay took charge of the colony. Sometime after d'Aulnay died in a drowning accident in spring of 1650, Jeanne married Charles de La Tour to consolidate the assets of the two explorers.