

Early Missions along Bay Chaleur

by
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It was the great French explorer Jacques Cartier who on July 3, 1534, sailed northward along Miscou Island and rounded its northern point. He called this point the Cape of Hope because before him lay a great open bay, the fulfillment he thought of his quest for the long-sought passage to the West. He named the bay, the Bay of Heat, because of the heat he experienced there on July 9th. These names, Cape of Hope and Bay Chaleur are the first names applied by any European, so far as we know, to any part of New Brunswick.¹ According to Cartier's own story "The Cape of the said land on the south was named Cape of Hope because of our hope of finding there some passage. The fourth day of the month, on the feast of St. Martin, we coasted along the land on the north to seek a harbor and we entered a little bay and creek, altogether open towards the south, where there is no protection against the winds. We named it the harbor of St. Martin [now Port Daniel]. We remained there from the fourth day of July until the twelfth and whilst we were there, we went on Monday, the sixth, after Mass, with one of our boats to discover a cape and point of land which lay 7 or 8 leagues to the west of us [Paspebiac Point]." Cartier on his account stresses the fact that the Indians of the district were ready for the missionary harvest, "We saw that they are people whom it would be easy to convert." "I believe, more than ever, that the people will be easy to convert to our Holy Faith."² Cartier was correct. The Indians of Bay Chaleur were, then and ever afterwards, well disposed to listen to the words of the black robe. Here are two very striking instances of it.

The first witness is Father Sagard, a Recollet, who is our greatest authority on Canadian missions, particularly on Huron missions. This is what he says "But the most honest and most understanding savages that I have discovered in this so great an extent of country are, in my opinion, those of the Bay [of Chaleur] and the country of Miscou, speaking generally, because in every nation there are some individuals who surpass in goodness and honesty, and others who exceed in wickedness." The renowned Rameau wrote "We do not know of an act of violence committed by the Indians in

¹ *History of Miscou*, W. F. Ganong, p. 13.

² *Voyages de Jacques Cartier*, H. P. Biggar 1924, Publication of the Public Archives of Canada, No. 11, p. 40.

Acadie during the time of French domination.”

In 1642 Father Richard wrote to his Superior at Quebec that the people of Bay Chaleur (Restigouche) and others still farther away wished to be converted. “Going to visit them, I was much consoled at the sight of a great cross that they had planted before their cabins. They urged me to dwell with them to instruct them, assuring me that it was all in good faith and they wished to believe in God.”

A period of exploration is always followed by a period of exploitation, and so we find that soon after Cartier’s voyage, French fishermen and traders came to Bay Chaleur. There were then two groups in need of the ministry of the Church-Indians and French colonists. The Bay Chaleur coast at a very early date, says Professor Ganong, “was first settled by Norman fishermen, some of whom married Indian women. The documents of 1760 in the Canadian Archives give seventeen families of Normandes and Metisses living at Gaspé, Pabos, etc. Some of their descendants settled at Caraquet.”³ Nicolas Denys tells us in his description of Caraquet (c. 1654) “It is in these two rivers that it has been customary for the batteaus of the Normands to seek safety when they are too hard pressed by a storm whilst the ships are at Isle Perce.”³

Father LeTac writes of “certain Basques who came to trade without leave on the coast of Acadia” in the early 1600’s.⁴

In 1614 Champlain, in quest of missionaries for Quebec, went to the Recollet Fathers of Bruage, Aquitaine, his native town. Since they had only recently inaugurated their institution there they had no missionary fathers ready for the missions and in their place the fathers at Paris answered the invitation, going to Quebec. The Aquitaine fathers arrived five years later on board a merchant vessel from Bordeaux and came to Acadia. The places at which they chose to settle were Saint John, Port Royal and Miscou.

Father Pacifique says that Bathurst can boast of being the first mission in New Brunswick. He says “It is true that Father Biard celebrated Mass, passing through the St. John river district on October 11th, but this was only once (Relation, 1611, p. 34). It is also true that the first missionary (Father Bernardin) went to Miscou in 1619 and doubtless celebrated Mass several times there. But he established his mission at Nepisiguit (Bathurst) in 1620.” The name for the little church was “the Cabin of Jesus.”⁵

Father Sebastian Bernardin spent three years at Nepisiguit, the central point from which he could travel to Miscou, Restigouche and Miramichi.

He learned the Indian language quickly and had much success in his sacred ministry. In 1622 he went to Quebec to visit the headquarters of his

³ *Description of North America*, p. 219.

⁴ *Histoire chronologique*, p. 119.

⁵ Father Pacifique’s *Chronicles of Oldest Churches in Acadia*, p. 1.

Order and he took as his companion an Indian Chief who was an exemplary convert. Sagard calls him “a wise man, grave, gentle and widely experienced, disapproving of the levity and inconstancy of our men, whom he softly reproved by his silence and poise.”⁶ In 1623 Father Bernardin met a tragic death. Father Chretien LeClercq says he was lost in the woods on a journey from Miscou and the Nepisiguit to the Saint John river travelling through the Tobigne portage, although LeTac says it was while spending the winter with the Indiana. Father LeClercq writes: “The Reverend Father Sebastian Bernardin had laboured there for three years when in 1623 we learned at Quebec, by two Indians, the news of his death. This good religious had started from Miscou for St. John’s river where the chief mission of the Recollets of his province has been established. He was overcome by misery and fatigue while traversing the woods and the great extent of the country between Miscou and Port Royal, so that he perished of hunger after having holily exercised the Apostolic ministry in the conversion of the infidels. As he had visited our Fathers at Quebec and wintered there, our religious considered him in esteem and offered the usual suffrages for him at the Convent of Our Lady of the Angel.”⁷ He was the first Franciscan missionary to give his life in Canada. Professor W. F. Ganong “not of his faith but an admirer of his spirit” named Mount Bernardin at the headwaters of the Nepisiguit River in his honor, near the place where tradition says he met death.⁸

From 1623 to 1635 Nepisiguit was without a missionary. In 1635 the Jesuits chose Miscou as the central mission. Two Fathers arrived from Quebec, the Rev. Charles Turgis and the Rev. Charles du Marche. They built a chapel dedicated to their common patron, St. Charles, to serve the spiritual needs of the Indians and the twenty-three Frenchmen who were established there. The Miscou climate proved most insalubrious to the European settlers and they suffered breakdowns in health. Father du Marche was compelled to leave for France. Even Champlain, over thirty years before, had remarked on the bitter climate “There were formerly some Frenchmen who wintered in this place and were not very comfortable on account of the very great cold, as well as the snow.”⁹

Father Turgis resisted the severe climate for some time but, at last, he too was overcome and he died in 1637, the second priest martyr of Bay Chaleur. The *Relation* of 1647 carries the story “Sufferings were almost the only occupation of all these poor people. Sickness laid them low and death carried off a great portion of them. Father du Marche was constrained to go

⁶ *Etudes*, p. 113.

⁷ *First Establishment of The Faith*, I, p. 200.

⁸ *Etudes*, pp. 8 and 112.

⁹ *Voyages de Champlain*, p. 1085.

back to France. Father Turgis resisted for some time, consoling his little fold, receiving confession with some, fortifying others by the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Extreme Unction, burying those that death swallowed up. But at last, work and the foul air that he breathed near these sick ones struck him down as well as the others.” Fathers Jacques de la Place and Nicolas Gondoin arrived (1637) shortly after Father Turgis’s death. They found that only nine remained of the original colony of twenty three Frenchmen.

Father Gondoin, in turn, could not withstand the unhealthy climate and he too fell ill and had to return to France. Father de la Place remained and in 1638 was joined by Father Claude Quentin. Both these Fathers tried to build a chapel, but abandoned the project due to lack of finances, and in 1640 went to Quebec. Two new Fathers, one a Jesuit the other a Recollet, came to make still another supreme effort. They were Fathers Andre Richard and Jean d’Olbeau. In 1643 Father d’Olbeau was compelled to return to France, but never reached his destination. The vessel was attacked en route by three frigates and was blown up when a spark fell into the powder magazine. In 1644 Father Martin de Lyonne came to replace Father d’Olbeau. He fell ill too, but after four months recovered perfect health. “He seems,” says the *Relation* of 1647 (p. 77) “to have buried illness for none appeared since then at Miscou.” Once more recovered, he was a great help to Father Richard.

Fathers Richard and de Lyonne often visited Nepisiguit and went as far as Restigouche. They baptized many Indians. The first whose name comes to us is the Chief Nepsuget, probably from the Restigouche, who was baptized in 1644 under the name Joseph. The second, another chief, Jariet of Nepisiguit, was baptized at Miscou on July 30, 1645 with his wife. The names they received were Denys and Marguerite.¹⁰ This, perhaps, is an indication of the arrival at Nepisiguit of Nicolas Denys, the Governor of all Acadia, and his wife Marguerite. They came in 1644. In 1647 the Fathers baptized forty infidels in three months.

We can see that Fathers Richard and de Lyonne spent a great part of their time at Nepisiguit and the journeys between Miscou and Nepisiguit must have been very arduous. Dr. W. F. Ganong remarks¹¹ “We can then say in all historic certainty that if Fathers Richard and de Lyonne were the true founders of the Miscon Mission, it is no less certain that to them comes the honour and the glory of having formed the basis of the Nepisiguit Mission at the south of Bay Chaleur. The members of the Company of Miscou, among others M. de la Ferte “sent them sufficient help to establish a residence in this admirably situated place.”

“Mons. the Abbe de la Magdelaine, Canon (Chanter) of the Sainte Chappelle at Paris, impelled by a truly Christian zeal and wishing to

¹⁰ *Relations of 1644*.45, Ch. XII, p. 23.

¹¹ *History of Miscou*, p. 30.

co-operate in the conversion of these savages, gave to these good Fathers the means to build a residence at the Port de Nipigigui where he has with the Messieurs of the Company of Miskou greatly assisted them. Before that abode was ready, the Fathers chose to live there, in order to assist the savages who usually retire to that place.”¹²

We are told that Chief Denis Jariet, therefore, “withdrew [from Miskou] quite content and returned to Nepegiguit to continue the hunt for beaver and to help as much as he could in completing the building that Mons. the Abbe of Sainte Magdalene and Messieurs the Associates for Miskou have caused to be begun near us for him, and for Joseph Nepsuget who was baptized last year. They are on good terms with each other.”¹³

This residence and Chapel at Nepisiguit was in existence before 1645 and was dedicated to the Mother of God. It is the second Chapel in New Brunswick to the mentioned in the old documents and its antiquity is honoured in the name given to the East Bathurst Church, St. Mary’s, and to Mount St. Mary, the Bishop’s residence. Father Richard was very dear to the Nepisiguit Indians and it was they who asked him to stay permanently with them. It was he perhaps they asked one day to bless their river, the Nepisiguit (the Indian name means ‘leaping or foaming water’) – “Father our river is very bad, in the strong and dangerous current; it is perhaps because it has not been ‘baptized’ (blessed). The priest having blessed it, it no longer caused a loss of life.”¹⁴

Father Richard established permanently at Bathurst in 1646, in company with Brother Jacques, and formed a Community in miniature with Divine Office in common on feast days and Sundays.¹⁵ It is believed the chapel was near the site of Nicolas Denys’ fort and many relics have been found on this location.

In 1647 Father Richard went to Quebec to ask that the Bathurst Mission be further developed and made materially secure. He left his biretta upon the altar as a guarantee of his return, and to prove his Order’s right of establishment saying he would come back as soon as he could to retrieve it. But it is twelve years later when we hear again of Father Richard. On May 16, 1659, in company with a Father Fremin of Richibucto, he escorts 140 persons to be confirmed at Percé by Bishop Laval.¹⁶

In 1648 Father Balthazar, a Capuchin, replaced the Jesuit, Father Richard, and he remained six years. A confrère, Father Ignace, gives us an account of his work. “Father Balthazar from Paris went to Nepisiguit in 1648

¹² *Relations of 1644-45*, Ch. XII, p. 23.

¹³ *Relations 1644.45*, Ch. XII.

¹⁴ *Etudes*, p. 199.

¹⁵ *Relations of 1646*, p. 87.

¹⁶ *Etudes*, p. 118.

and resided there for six full years in the place commonly called Nepisiguit on the border of the limits of Acadia in the North, in the middle of Bay Chaleur. He travelled all the territory which extends from this Bay to the residence of St. Peter in the country of Canceaux – a radius of at least 100 leagues. He crossed land and forest, lakes and rivers, withstanding privation and cold, labor and sickness of which we have no idea. He converted twenty entire families of Indians and more persons than all the other missionaries. He spoke Indian as well as his native French.”

Father Balthazar left in 1654 for France to recruit more missionaries and to inform the authorities how the surrender of Port Royal with the consequent English invasion had affected missionary work. He could obtain no help however and left once more for Acadia. After an unsuccessful venture at sea compelled his second return to France, he finally regained his Missions in 1656. This time he brought a companion, but we do not know who he was. In 1658 they went to Cape Breton where they met three Jesuits and a secular priest.¹⁷ Father Balthazar then disappears from history and we do not know his whereabouts thereafter, but it is quite probable that he returned to his old Mission and that he died there. Tradition says that several priests and a French admiral lie buried at the site of Nicolas Denys’ old fort at Ferguson’s Point (Point-au-Père) Bathurst. Professor Ganong¹⁸ thinks that Nicolas Denys is the admiral mentioned. He died in 1688. There was an old willow supposedly marking the cemetery site but this was cut down about twelve years ago, although the tree stump is still to be seen. Cannon balls, gun locks, bricks and even quarried stone have been found here. These were in great part carried away by American tourists. As a young boy I found what seems to be a cornice stone of red sandstone, rounded off as though used in a tower. I believe this is the last relic found there.

Nicolas Denys writes “My establishment of Nepisiguit is on the border of this basin at a league to the right of its entrance. At low water a canoe can scarcely approach it. It is there that I have been obliged to retire after the burning of my Fort of Saint Pierre in the Island of Cape Breton (winter of 1668-9). My house is flanked there by four little bastions with a palisade of which the stakes are 18 feet in height, with six pieces of cannon in batteries. The lands are not of the best – there are rocks in some places.”¹⁹

Father Chretien LeClercq, also a Recollet father, was the next missionary to serve the Nepisiguit region. He made Restigouche his headquarters and spent most of his time there. In September, 1676, we find

¹⁷ “*Pages glorieuses de l’Epopée Canadienne, de Nant,*” pp. 259, 291. *Le Devoir* 1927.

¹⁸ *New Relations*, W.F. Ganong, p. 213.

¹⁹ Nicolas Denys, *Description of Natural History of the Coasts of North America* (Acadia Champlain Society, p. 213.)

him at Nepisiguit, where he spent the winter.

He gives us a harrowing account of his experiences when he was lost in the woods on his way to the Miramichi, on January 26, 1677, and the whole tale is absorbing from beginning to end and should be on the literature curriculum of our schools. Father LeClercq's companion was Mr. Philip Enaud who had been living at Nepisiguit since 1666²⁰ and had married a squaw. In 1714 Enaud was still living at Shippegan.²¹ He figures as a man of prominence in Father LeClercq's account.

Father LeClercq was impressed with Nepisiguit as the ideal mission site and he prevailed upon the Seigneur, Richard Denys of Fronsac (son of Nicolas Denys), then living at Miramichi, for the concession of Nepisiguit that it might become a permanent village for all the Indians of the district (Miramichi, Nepisiguit and Restigouche). Richard Denys, because of financial loss, could not carry out the project. The Quebec Seminary too did not find the project feasible and so Father LeClercq was forced to abandon it.

This must have been a disappointment to Father LeClercq for he deeply loved Bathurst. He writes²² "Nepisiguit is one of the most charming places in all the great Bay of St. Lawrence. It is distant only a dozen to fifteen leagues from Isle Percé. The land there is fertile and abounds in everything; the air is pure and healthy. Three beautiful rivers which empty there form a very attractive basin, whose waters lose themselves in the sea through a strait which makes and marks the entrance thereto. The Recollets of the Province of Aquitaine commenced there a Mission in 1620 and Father Bernardin, one of those illustrious missionaries, died of hunger and fatigue in traversing the woods on the way from Miscou and Nepisiguit to the River Saint John in Acadia, where these Reverend Fathers had their principal establishment. The Reverend Capuchin Fathers and especially the Reverend Jesuit Fathers have there employed their zeal and their charity for the conversion of the pagans. They have had a Chapel built, dedicated to the Holy Virgin, and it is observed that one of the Fathers who had gone from that Mission left his hat upon the altar, saying that he would return to seek it when it pleased him; this he did to make known that his Order had the right of establishment in this place. The Sieur Henaut de Barbanconnes cultivates the soil there with success and harvests wheat more than sufficient for the support of his family. Monsieur Richard Denys de Fronsac is Seigneur Proprietor of the place."

Nicolas Denys also described the place most appreciatively in his *Description of North America*. "The whole extent of this large cove is a league of length. It has behind it large and fine meadows ... So great a

²⁰ *Etudes*, p. 120.

²¹ *Etudes*, p. 125.

²² *New Relations of Gaspesia* (Champlain Edition), p. 161.

quantity of wild geese, ducks and brant is seen that it is not believable, and they all make so great a noise at night that one has trouble to sleep ... Four rivers empty into this basin of which three come from the hills that are visible at their heads; and the other which is larger falls into this basin on the left side in entering ... There is hardly anything but meadows on both sides of this basin, beyond which the land is crowded with fine trees of all kinds.”

Since Nepisiguit was this author’s residence when he wrote these lines, the description is most accurate. Denys was the contemporary at Nepisiguit of Father LeClercq. The monument to Denys at Bathurst carries the inscription “Appointed Governor and Lieut: General of the Coast and Islands of the Gulf St. Lawrence from Canso to Gaspé in 1654.” “Pioneer in trade and in the fishing industry. Naturalist and author of a classical work on Acadia 1672. His chief residence was at Pointe an Père (Ferguson Point) on Nepisiguit (Bathurst) Harbor, where he died and was buried in 1688.”

Father LeClercq made Restigouche his headquarters until his departure in 1687 and Fathers Moreau and Jumeau succeeded him, remaining until 1690 when Phipps and the American filibusters made their double assault on Percé and other settlements in 1690. We do not know whether Nepisiguit was attacked directly but the Indian Chief Halion (or Hilarion, Lalio) was incited by the English, it is thought, to massacre the French and they were driven from their settlement in 1692. This event sorely diminished Nepisiguit’s missionary vigor, and it is not until 1755, when the Acadians arrived, after the Expulsion, that we find any great number of the faithful there.

Cooney contends that the Indians chased the French out of Nepisiguit, but this is not certain. It seems only Enaud’s children remained. However, the missionaries at Miramichi and Restigouche carried on their work and rendered spiritual service to the Indians and the few French colonists of Nepisiguit. We know the names of the missionaries Michel Brulé (1706-20), Gelase (1720.1745), Lue (1730), Ambroise (1727-68).²³

After the Acadian Expulsion of 1755, the Acadians who escaped deportation came to the Bay of Chaleur, and settled along its coasts. Their largest settlement probably was at Pointe à la Garde, a village of 1500 souls. Byron (the grandfather of Lord Byron the poet) attacked the village and burned two hundred houses. The English attacked the settlements again in 1761. Smethurst tells us²⁴ that Captain Roderick McKenzie arrived at Nepisiguit with sixty men to drive out the French inhabitants in October, 1761. He took 180 prisoners. From the other settlements along the Bay he took 787 but could send only 335 to the prisons in Halifax, due to lack of

²³ *Etudes*, p. 127.

²⁴ *Narrative of an Extraordinary Escape Out of Hands of Indians*, Gamaliel Smethurst, London, MDCC LXXIV

transport. He had to set the others free. “Left Nepisiguit in the Bay of Chaleur, Capt. McKenzie with about 50 Highlanders arrived to move the people; he took them all unexpectedly; they were very unwilling to be removed. He took about 180 persons with all their vessels to the number of eleven sloops and shallops.” Smethurst was abandoned at Nepisiguit by the cowardly captain of Smethurst’s own vessel – because of a craven fear of the Indians.

In 1777 the American Revolutionaries attacked Nepisiguit and destroyed Commodore George Walker’s establishment at Allston Point (here since 1768) but the Acadians were not molested at this time.

In 1773 Father Mathurin Bourg became pastor of Carleton, P.Q., and for a period of 12 years he had charge of all the Acadian Missions. His pastorate today comprises seven dioceses. He was an indefatigable worker. Nepisiguit probably was one of his favorite stations. Father Bourg was on good terms with the English settlers and we find him doing the favor of carrying a letter from Robert Adams at Restigouche to Colonel Goold at Bathurst on October 2, 1784, the year after the landing of the Loyalists at Saint John.

In 1791-92-94-95 Father Bourg is mentioned in the parish registers at Caraquet. Caraquet began as a parish after the Acadian Expulsion. Special mention should be made of the little shrine, St. Anne de Bocage, established by Alexis Landry (who died March 6, 1798 aged 78) in thanksgiving for preservation from shipwreck of some Acadiens fleeing from the Expulsion. This is the first Caraquet Church and it was built in 1786. The cruets in the Church bear the inscription “Hôtel Dieu, Québec-1735.”

After the French Revolution, several French priests, victims of the persecution, came to help Father Bourg. One of these was Father L. J. Desjardins who began the church registers at Nepisiguit in 1798. Then we find the names of Fathers Delavaivre, Joyer, B. Orfray (1806-10) Francois Huot (1810.13). When Bishop Plessis visited Nepisiguit in 1811 we find that there was quite a settlement. We are told in Bishop Plessis’ account that two priests were occupied from Wednesday, July 3rd until Sunday, July 7th, hearing confessions. “The confessions of the parish and of several Indian families, settled there these last few years, sufficed to occupy all the time of the two priests employed in hearing them, and did not even give them the leisure to accept the invitation of Mr. [Hugh] Munro, Merchant and Justice of the Peace of the place.”²⁵

It is probable that Bishop Plessis gave the parish at Nepisiguit its name “Holy Family,” because it is named in the records for the first time on October 5, 1812, a year after the Bishop’s visit. Bishop Plessis himself, in 1811, wrote “It is between the two rivers and on a fairly high plateau that the Church of the place is situated under the name of The Holy Family.”

²⁵ *Mission de 1811*, p. 115.

Nepisiguit may claim to be the oldest continuously occupied settlement in all New Brunswick for “it is very likely” says W. F. Ganong²⁶ “that some at least of these Acadians remained at Nepisiguit from this time down to 1778 when we know positively that the permanent occupation of the locality by the Acadians had commenced.” In this case, the Acadian settlement here is one of the oldest, If not. the very oldest, of the continuously occupied settlements of New Brunswick. Bishop Plessis remarked in 1811 “Nepisiguit is one of the first establishments on the Bay, though it is not easy to determine its origin.”²⁷

²⁶ *History of Caraguet*, W. F. Ganong, p. 19.

²⁷ *Mission de 1811*, p. 119