

Cabot, cod and the colonists



When John Cabot crossed the Atlantic 500 years ago he was seeking a route to the Orient. But the merchants who were paying for his voyage were after something less exotic — cod. That conflicted journey shaped the history of Newfoundland



By Heather Pringle

BILL GILBERT clammers up a steep slope covered in springy heath and turns, gazing down at the tiny Newfoundland harbour that once cradled Sea Forest Plantation. Along the cove below, tiny spruce trees sprinkle the lowlands; rust-red heath and low-bush blueberry carpet the rocky ground. Tidy houses, each painted a fresh white, dot the harbour's edge. The water shimmers like foil. Zipping up his polar fleece against the cold, Gilbert surveys the little harbour where merchants sought their fortunes nearly 400 years ago. "I think the brewhouse was probably down around there somewhere," he says softly, pointing to a small saltwater pond. "And they were building boats, so there would have been some sort of shipyard or boatyard."

Founded in 1610, a decade before the Pilgrims celebrated their first Thanksgiving at Plymouth, Sea Forest Plantation, also known as Cupers Cove, was Canada's first official English colony. Financed by the London and Bristol Company, a small coterie of merchants from England's two greatest ports, the fledgling plantation became a small outpost in a wild land, the culmination of more than a century of searching for new fishing grounds to feed a hungry Europe. Long lost to time and memory in the modern village of Cupids, tucked on the northern shore of the Avalon Peninsula, the colony remained for centuries little more than an entry in the history books. Two years ago, however, Gilbert and his crew unearthed the first traces of its ruins: the corner of a 17th-century wooden house complete with a massive stone fireplace.

Most of Bristol's blue bloods turn out to wish John Cabot well in this fanciful version, imagined in 1906 by the English historical painter Ernest Board, of the voyager's May 1497 departure for the lands that became Canada.

Over the past two summers, the unassuming archeologist and his team of eight have exhumed thousands of relics — pieces of early 17th-century smoking pipes, case bottles (an early form of glass bottle made in England), handmade iron nails, trade beads and coarse English earthenware. While the colonists at Cupers Cove experimented with mineral exploration, fur trading, agriculture and sawmilling, their lives depended on the harbour and the ocean beyond. “In order to survive here,” says Gilbert, “they really needed to fish.”

But by the time these first settlers were wandering the primeval forests of the coast, European ships had been harvesting cod in the seas off Newfoundland for more than a century. For decades, historians have suggested that Giovanni Caboto, or John Cabot as he is now better known, stumbled on the region’s cod-rich waters 500 years ago this summer by accident as he scoured the seas for a western route to Asia’s spices, teas and porcelains. Many researchers have also dismissed Newfoundland’s earliest colonies as dismal failures, suggesting they collapsed within a few short years of their founding. Newfoundland, or so the story went, remained the almost exclusive preserve of Beothuk and Mi’Kmaq hunters and fleets of seasonal European fishers until the 18th century.

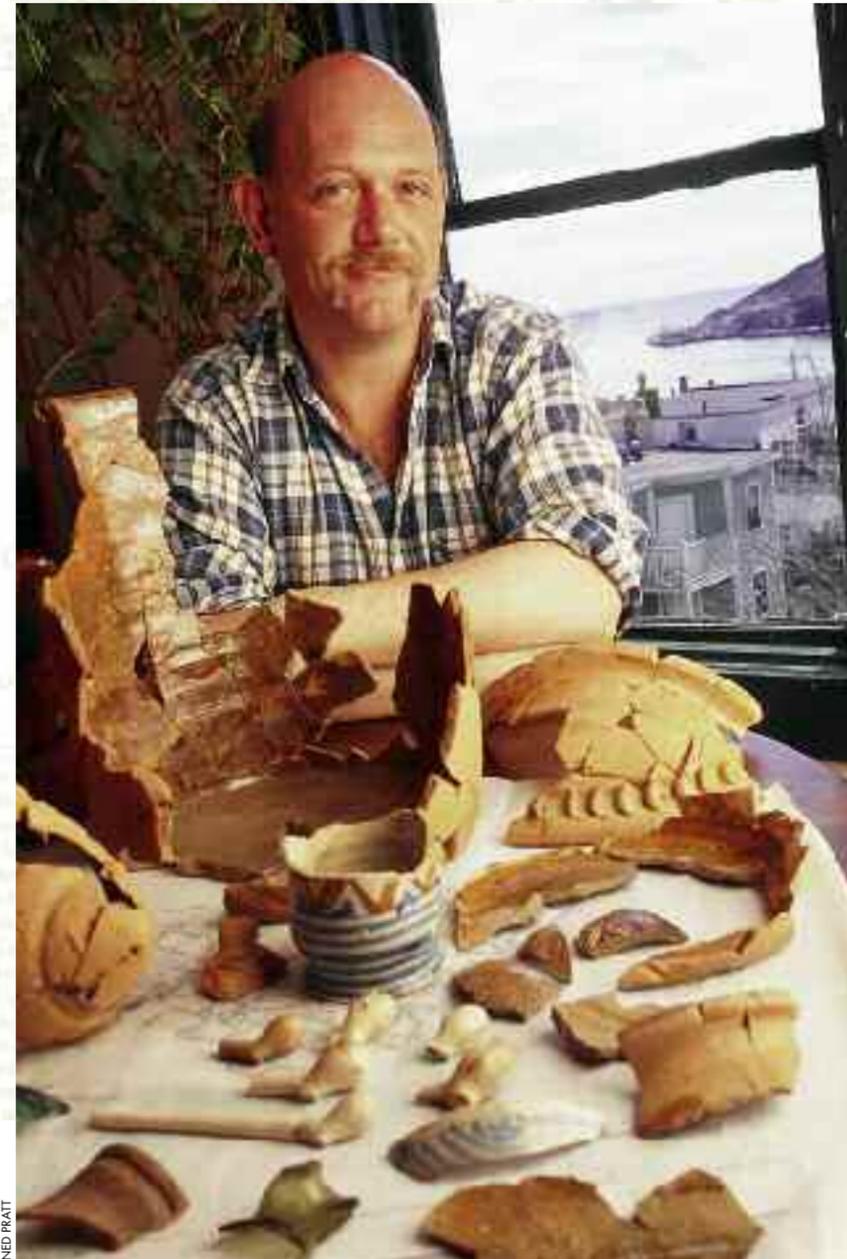
In recent years, however, archeologists, geographers and historians have uncovered a different tale. Poring over documents in European archives and excavating early colonial sites along Newfoundland’s English Shore, they are exhuming new evidence of pre-Cabot exploration and 17th-century settlement in the North Atlantic. The history of the early fishing captains of the North Atlantic, who were little interested in leaving behind records of their voyages and routes for competitors to read,

is gradually being revealed. It is a tale woven from a host of seemingly unrelated threads — the Catholic calendar in medieval Europe, the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the market for olive oil in the Mediterranean, and the Spanish quest for gold in the New World.

Far from being the first European to reach North America, say researchers such as Newfoundland geographer Gordon Hancock, Cabot likely sailed with some knowledge of the New World gleaned from earlier English mariners. Moreover, while the famous Italian navigator undertook his historic 1497 voyage to scout a route to the wealth of Cathay and Cipango in Asia, those financing both him and the first colonies of Newfoundland sought something more essential to Europeans — new fishing grounds to replace the overcrowded, some say exhausted, waters of Europe. The early colonies that followed were successful, shaping Newfoundland lives for generations. “The result of Cabot was the fishery,” says Peter Pope, an archeologist at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St. John’s. “That’s not what he intended, but that was what happened.”

SITTING IN A CROWDED CAFE a few blocks from the harbour in St. John’s, Pope downs the last of his cappuccino. Clearly relishing his subject, he leans forward as he sums up the historical prelude to Cabot’s famous voyage. The author of a forthcoming book, *The Many Landfalls of John Cabot*, Pope points out that it was not the Italian mariner and his crew but early Norse seafarers who were truly the first Europeans to land in North America. Sailing westward from Viking settlements in Iceland and Greenland, says Pope, the Norse crossed Davis

PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR/V166/35



NED PRATT

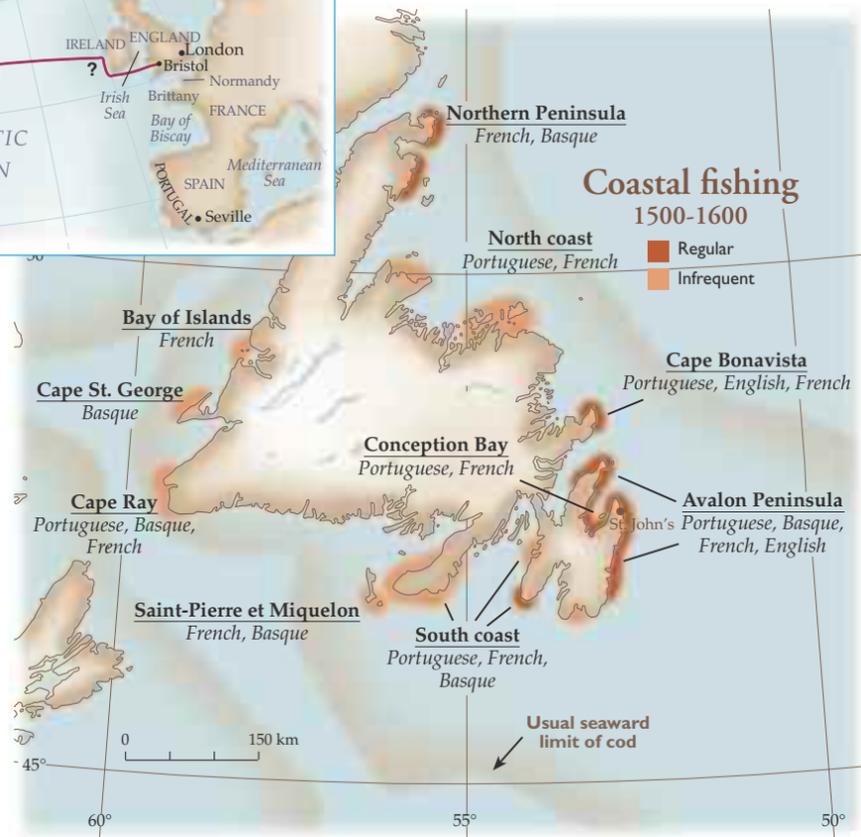


BILL GILBERT/BACCANIEU TRAIL HERITAGE CORPORATION

England’s first Canadian colony was at Cupers Cove, now Cupids, Nfld., established in 1610 and probably, according to experts like Memorial University archeologist Bill Gilbert (LEFT) continuously occupied since. Excavations have turned up thousands of 17th-century artifacts including the hearth (BELOW) of a pre-1620 house. Like other Newfoundland outposts, Cupids made its living on cod, which was dried outside — as in this scene (OPPOSITE) photographed at Ferryland in 1938 — before being shipped to market.



Stories about Norse sailors, who worked their way across the North Atlantic by AD 1000 (ABOVE), may have inspired explorers like John Cabot five centuries later. By the 16th century (RIGHT), English, French, Portuguese and Basque fishers were catching cod in established zones off Newfoundland's coast.



STEVEN FICK/CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC; ADAPTED FROM HISTORICAL ATLAS OF CANADA, VOLUME I

Strait in the 10th century, journeying down the coasts of Baffin Island and Labrador before building a small outpost at the northern tip of Newfoundland. Known today as L'Anse aux Meadows — and discovered in 1960 by Norwegians Anne Stine Ingstad and Helge Ingstad — the outpost, says Pope, thrived briefly before the Norse retreated to Greenland.

But for centuries after, the North Atlantic and its mysteries continued to beckon, thanks to a flourishing European appetite for fish. Permitted by Rome in the eighth century to dine on cod, salmon, herring and other fish on the fast days that flecked the Christian calendar, Catholic Europe clamoured for seafood. To satisfy this hunger and to round out fare in parts of Europe poor in protein, local fishing fleets took to the water. Atlantic cod soon became the fish of choice. With its firm flaky flesh and low fat content it could be readily dried outdoors and stored over the winter months for the 40 days of fasting at Lent. By the 12th century, Norwegian villagers presided over a flourishing international trade in dried cod known as stockfish.

Others soon followed. Fanning out from the Barents Sea off northern Norway to the Bay of Biscay off France, European fishers plumbed the shallow waters for the bottom-feeding cod. Before long, says Pope, Europe's fleets were jostling for the best spots. In the Irish Sea, Basque fishing boats took aim at the English fleet. "The Basques had the bigger and better armed ships," says Pope. Refusing to concede

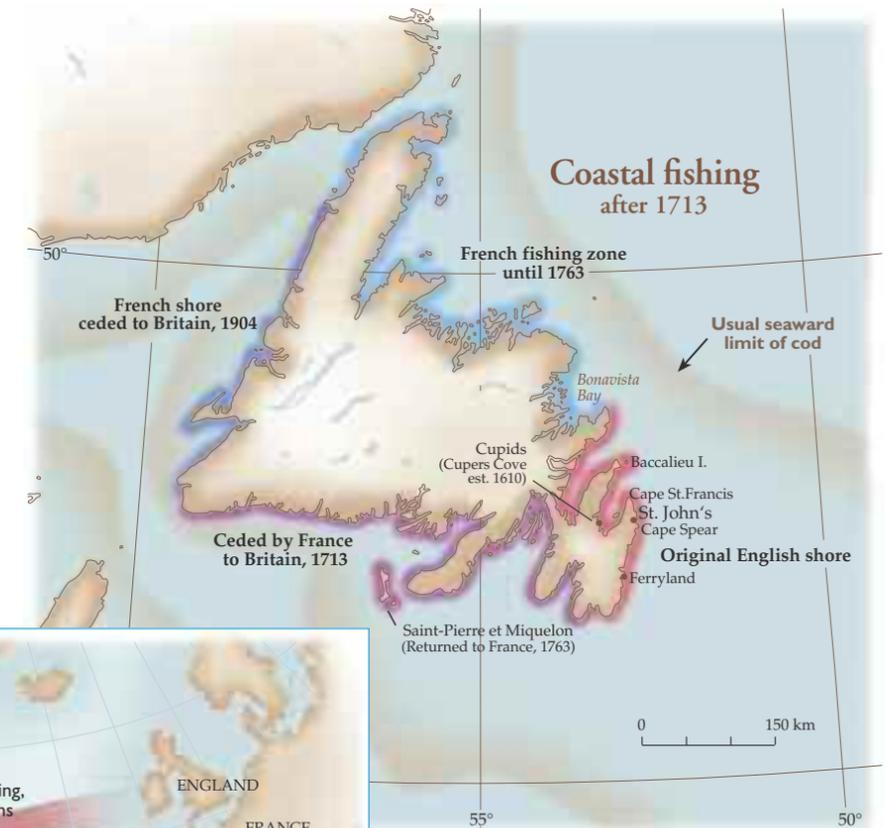
defeat, some English vessels — particularly those from the western port of Bristol — headed north to Iceland where cod was reputedly abundant and Icelanders ill-equipped to defend their waters.

The English fleet began scouring Iceland's inshore waters as early as 1408 or 1409. Alarmed by these invaders, Icelandic chieftains soon complained to King Eirik, the monarch of Denmark, Sweden and Norway, citing English greed and a disturbing decline in the fishery. Whether the decline was the result of a natural fluctuation in the stocks or overfishing inshore, it is hard to say, notes Pope.

The sudden dearth of fish did not go unnoticed by the English. It could have been then that a few crews began scouting for richer waters to the west, says Kirsten Seaver, an American historian and the author of *The Frozen Echo: Greenland and the Exploration of North America, ca. A.D. 1000-1500*. As proof, Seaver points to two intriguing archeological finds in western Greenland. While excavating Gardar — the bishop's seat in Greenland — some 70 years ago, archeologist Poul Norlund discovered a small table knife identical to those adorning tables in late 14th-century London. In addition, archeologists excavating another large medieval Greenland farm, Hvalsey, unearthed a small cross made of English pewter.

Such finds suggest that some English captains called in along the western coast of Greenland, soon after the large-scale English exploitation of the Icelandic fisheries began.

French and, increasingly, English fleets came to dominate the Newfoundland cod fishery by the early 18th century (RIGHT), with dried, salted Newfoundland cod a central commodity in a three-way transatlantic trade (BELOW).



Once they had arrived in Greenland, says Kirsten Seaver, the English lay just a short crossing away from Baffin Island. To the Norwegian-born historian, it seems only logical that the English soon took the same northern route to the New World first discovered by early Norse seafarers. "There's really no reason to suppose that there was anything to stop the English once they had more familiarity with the bigger ships and more familiarity with navigational hazards in the Atlantic," she notes.

Just where along the eastern coast of North America the English explored remains unclear: archeologists working on Baffin Island and in northern Labrador have never unearthed any definite evidence of early English fishers. But word of a new land to the west seems to have reached Bristol in the late 1470s, according to a contemporary account written by William of Worcester and published in the late 18th century. In 1480, for example, Bristol merchant John Jay outfitted at great expense an 80-tonne ship for the island of Brazil, a name often given in medieval European tales to a land far to the west of Ireland. Setting sail in July from Bristol, Jay's ship voyaged west, intending to "traverse the seas." But the journey ended in failure. English crews, says Pope, had yet to master the new methods of astronomical navigation devised in Portugal and Spain: open, oceanic voyaging — as opposed to island hopping by way of Iceland and Greenland — would have been a highly risky proposition. Buffeted by storms, undoubtedly lost, Jay's ship returned

home empty-handed.

To find a direct route to the New World, the Bristol interests needed a European navigator skilled in the new techniques. They eventually located just the man — John Cabot. Likely born near Naples around 1455, Cabot lived most of his adult life in Venice and became a merchant in the lucrative Mediterranean trade, journeying as far east as Alexandria in Egypt. Convinced that the silks and porcelains of the East could be had by voyaging to the west, he soon settled in Spain, knocking on doors in Seville for financing. But Cabot was too late, notes author Alan F. Williams in a new book, *John Cabot and Newfoundland*. A compatriot, Christopher Columbus, had already begun lobbying the Spanish crown for such a charter.

Undeterred, Cabot sought other backers. Aware of Bristol enterprises in the North Atlantic, he moved to England. There, he set to work mustering support for an exploratory voyage along a northwest passage to Asia. "What Cabot was interested in," says Pope, "was a comptoir, a trading post. These were the kinds of things the Venetians and the Genoese had all over the Mediterranean." Such a prospect would have appealed strongly to mercantile interests in England. But the canny Bristol shipowners may also have decided to kill two birds with one stone. While searching for a northwest passage, Cabot could also plot a route to the new land they had already stumbled upon. "Cabot was capable of going to a place, knowing what it was, putting it on a map

and telling you how to get back to it," says Pope.

Setting sail from Bristol in May 1497 with a crew of about 20 and a charter from England's Henry VII, Cabot struck out west. While researchers still debate exactly where he made landfall in North America (a confusion arising largely from the fact that Cabot's charts and logs, if they exist, have never been found), most scholars now suggest he cruised Newfoundland's northeastern coast and tasted fare from its rich fishing grounds. Back in England, Cabot claimed to have discovered the Orient and touted the gems and spices certain to be found a little farther along the coast. His crew, however, was excited by a very different treasure. "They declare that the sea there is full of fish that can be taken not only with nets but with fishing-baskets, a stone being placed in the basket to sink it in the water," wrote one contemporary observer, Raimondo di Soncino, in a letter to the Duke of Milan. "And the said Englishmen, his [Cabot's] partners, say that they can bring so many fish that this kingdom will have no more business with Iceland, with which country it has a very great trade in the fish called stock-fish."

SURROUNDED by precariously leaning piles of papers and crates of dusty books and charts, Gordon Handcock views a map of the Newfoundland coast. The son of a Bonavista Bay fisher and an expert on the island's geography, the avuncular researcher has spent decades studying the early cod fishery. From the start, he explains, word of the Newfoundland's bounty spread rapidly in Europe. By the 1520s, ships from Brittany, Normandy, Portugal and England flocked to Newfoundland, dividing up the best fishing grounds. While the Portuguese and English gravitated to the Avalon Peninsula, French ships fished the shores farther north, south and

west. "If you look at the names up and down the Avalon Peninsula there," says Handcock, "Baccalieu, that's Portuguese, so is Cape St. Francis, Cape Spear. So the Portuguese obviously had tenure off the southeastern coast."

Unable to negotiate Newfoundland's icebound waters in winter, the ships slipped into a seasonal rhythm, heading out from their home ports each March or April. Arriving some four weeks later, crews spent their summers fishing. As ships discovered the rich offshore banks after 1540, Portuguese, French and then Spanish ships began processing and curing their catch at sea by a method known as wet bulk — ample supplies of salt were poured over the layers of fresh fish in the holds. Some crews rarely stepped foot ashore. "They only used the harbours very sparingly for refuge and water and perhaps a bit of wood," says Handcock.

The English, however, had no such advantage. Lacking an abundant and cheap supply of salt at home, they were forced to adopt a more terrestrial method of curing their catch, combining drying and salting. Wooden stages and drying platforms known as flakes were built on their arrival in spring. Crews would then tend the catch ashore, turning the heavy fish, which average three to four kilograms, until they were properly dried and covering them when it rained. The process produced a superior cure. "Lightly salted dried cod was a source of protein second to none," says Handcock. "It was far more valuable and commanded a higher price than wet bulk or green fish."

But supplies of salted dried cod, at least at first, were lamentably small. As a minor European power in the mid-16th century, England was unable to wrest control of the Newfoundland fishery. Given the labyrinthine world of European politics, however, English merchants did not have long to

wait. In 1581 Spain and Portugal united under one rule; seven years later, the Spanish Armada — including most of Spain's fishing boats — was destroyed attempting to invade England. Unopposed and unhindered, English ships began to dominate the harbours of Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula.

Bristol merchants rubbed their hands in glee. Heading to Newfoundland in record numbers, crews from England's West Country began delivering to market thousands of tonnes of lightly salted cod. In southern Europe, victuallers, who supplied food and other provisions to ships, clamoured for English cod. Lightly salted dried cod resisted rot for years — even in tropical climates — making it an ideal lightweight naval ration. Intent on conquering Central and South America and ransacking its lands for gold, the Spanish navy depended on English dried fish. "Cod from Newfoundland was the lever by which [England] wrested her share of the riches of the New World from Spain," noted historian Harold Innes in his classic 1940 study, *The Cod Fisheries*.

Eyeing the fortunes to be made from the New World, merchants lined up to invest their capital in places like Cupers Cove.

BATHED IN THE SOFT LIGHT of the former schoolhouse in Cupids, Bill Gilbert unwraps some of the nearly 400-year-old debris discovered inside a planter's home. Opening boxes and gently removing tissue paper, he holds up tiny shards of West Country earthenware — black, yellow, mossy green — for inspection. Turning one partially reconstructed pot in his hand, Gilbert points out the thumbprints of a 17th-century potter along the rim and the sturdy design that marks it as a storage jar from Britain's West Country. With its glazed interior, he explains, such a pot may

have once stored a precious liquid, perhaps olive oil from the Mediterranean's shady groves.

Thousands of kilometres from Europe's shores, Newfoundland stood at the corner of a lucrative triangle. Crews filled their holds with Newfoundland cod in the late summer, then set sail for southern Spain, Portugal and Italy to trade their cargo for southern luxuries — olive oil, fine wines, dates, raisins, marmalade and other delicacies, which would soon be carried to English ports. In good years, the merchants who owned the ships stood to make a small fortune. "But it was very speculative," says Handcock, "like investing in modern-day mines." Much depended on matters beyond the investors' control — brushes with pirates, encounters with fierce storms and the vagaries of the Mediterranean olive crop. (Olives were a critical source of protein in southern Europe. If the year's crop proved bountiful, cod prices plummeted.) "The merchants used the term 'adventurer,'" adds Handcock. "I think that was because it established the right degree of risk-taking."

At Cupers Cove, the costs of building and provisioning a settlement and shuttling people and products to Europe soon outweighed profits. Around 1620, the company backers — a select group of merchants and gentry — apparently lost interest. Correspondence, once lively between the colony and the mother country, tapered off and died — leading most historians to assume that the plantation had been abandoned.

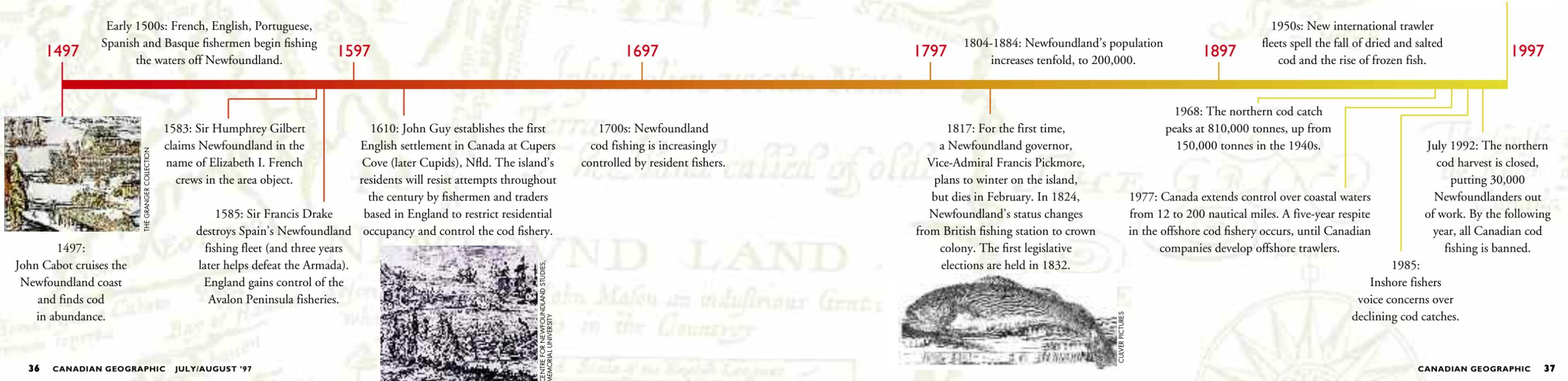
But when Gilbert and his archeological crew began their



COIN SAINGER

April 1997: Ottawa allows a limited cod catch off Newfoundland's south coast. A replica of Cabot's *Matthew* (ABOVE) prepares to cross the Atlantic for the 500th anniversary celebrations.

Cod in time





There were Butlers in Cupers Cove in 1610 and there are still Butlers there today, including Doris Butler (ABOVE), in front of the house built by Hickson Butler, around 1850, and her son Ira Butler and grandson Scott Butler (RIGHT), on board the fishing boat Ira built in 1994. The community of Cupids, seen below in an 1897 view, perches picturesquely on Conception Bay and gazes seaward still after nearly four centuries.



BOTH: NED PRATT; BELOW: ROBERT JOHN SMITH/COURTESY OF ALTON SMITH



IT HAS BEEN CALCULATED that if no accident prevented the hatching of the eggs and each egg reached maturity, it would take only three years to fill the sea so that you could walk across the Atlantic dryshod on the backs of cod.

Alexandre Dumas,
Le Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine, 1873

THE HERO, *gadus morhua*, is not a nice guy. It is built to survive. Fecund, impervious to disease and cold, feeding on most any food source, traveling to shallow waters and close to shore, it was the perfect commercial fish and the Basques had found its richest grounds. Cod should have lasted forever, and for a very long time it was assumed that it would. As late as 1885, the Canadian Ministry of Agriculture said, “Unless the order of nature is overthrown, for centuries to come our fisheries will continue to be fertile.”

Both excerpts from *Cod: The Tale of a Fish that Changed the World* by Mark Kurlansky, © 1997 Mark Kurlansky, published by Alfred A. Knopf Canada.

excavations, they discovered the historians had been wrong. The artifacts revealed that people had inhabited Cupers Cove throughout the 17th century and likely into modern times — long after financial assistance from England dried up. A similar continuity characterizes another 17th-century English plantation currently under excavation at Ferryland, 72 kilometres south of St. John’s. “So there is a core population here in Newfoundland that can trace its ancestry until the early 17th century,” says Gilbert.

For Cupids, the community of 800 that now stands on the site of Cupers Cove, the discovery has become a point of pride. “I suppose the archeological dig has reawakened the community to the importance of the site as the first English settlement,” says Roy Dawe, a founder of the Cupids Historical Society. “And it has confirmed our suspicions that there was continuous settlement.”

Fishing and selling dried catch to seasonal transport vessels, the residents of Cupers Cove and other early colonies built a new life in a new land. For centuries, cod ruled over all. “You couldn’t build the flakes very far away from shore,” says Hancock, “because the salt fish were very, very heavy. So there was a tremendous tendency to take the good harbours and develop them.” As the little coves closest to the

fishing grounds filled with stages and drying platforms, the following generations of Newfoundlanders spread out to the next closest harbours. In time, Newfoundland boasted hundreds of small communities sprinkled along the coast. “What we have here today,” says Hancock, “is a legacy of having to find fish and having to find places to process it.”

In the nascent outposts, Newfoundland’s enduring character was forged. Never much oriented towards land, these early colonists gazed firmly toward the sea. Spread out thinly over a rugged coast, they practised the virtues of self-sufficiency — building their own homes and boats and villages. Preserving their own folklore and dialects, creating their own music — all strongly influenced by the Celtic and West Country traditions that they carried with them from the Old World — they created a culture unlike any other in North America, one rooted deeply in the 17th century. In the end, the great fishery that Cabot, celebrated navigator and Newfoundland folk hero, almost ignored in his quest for a route to Asia, shaped nearly every aspect of life in Newfoundland. ♦

Heather Pringle is a writer in Vancouver and the author of *In Search of Ancient North America: An Archaeological Journey to Forgotten Cultures*.