

# EARLY HISTORY OF MAHONE BAY, NOVA SCOTIA

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**Editor's Note:** Paul Wroclawski is administrator of the "Oak Island Theories," an interesting and comprehensive Website about this area of the Nova Scotia coast ([www.oakisland-theories.com](http://www.oakisland-theories.com)). For centuries, speculation has abounded that the island holds treasure hidden there by the notorious pirate Captain Kidd, or by the French, Spanish, or British—even by the Mayans or Incans! Fortune hunters have expended great energy attempting to find the loot.

Oak Island sits near the eastern shore of Mahone Bay, southeast of Halifax (FIGURE 1). With his permission, NEARA has adapted and edited a portion of Mr. Wroclawski's website to narrative form for inclusion in this issue of the *NEARA Journal*. This article traces the early history of the region, from initial Amerindian presence, to occupation by the Portuguese, French, and British. It makes use of early maps. Readers can find more information on early cartography in "Gaspar Corte-Real" (*NEARA Journal* Vol. 42, No. 1, Summer, 2008).

Maps have been digitally enhanced for clarity.

## INTRODUCTION

Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia, surrounds Oak Island, which is the focal point of great notoriety as a possible location of fabulous buried treasure, and the intriguing question of who may have left it there, when, and why. Those mysteries remain unanswered. This article examines some fascinating aspects of the earliest known history of Mahone Bay, many of which have hitherto been quite obscure.

The geographical centre of Mahone Bay is located at  $44^{\circ} 29' 37.65''$  N and  $64^{\circ} 12' 21.53''$  W (FIGURE 2). The bay is approximately 22 km long, as measured from the high tide mark in Chester Basin to the open Atlantic past Iron Bound Island. The width of Mahone Bay is 16.5 km, measured from Blandford to Rose Point, which makes for a total area of approximately 288 square km.



FIGURE 1. MAP OF NOVA SCOTIA. ARROW POINTS TO MAHONE BAY. ©2001. NATURAL RESOURCES CANADA



FIGURE 2. MAP OF MAHONE BAY. MAP FROM WIKIPEDIA

The Bay is generally surrounded by hills which are a result of complex geological origins and are between 50-70 m in height. The eastern shore of the Bay is enclosed by the Aspotogan Peninsula, with its seaward promontory measuring about 145 m in height. This highland is known as Mount Aspotogan and is the highest point on the Atlantic coast of mainland Nova Scotia. This geographical feature can be seen at a distance of 20 km or more out to sea, and as historical texts show, was a point of reference for early seafarers.

Henry Hudson in 1609, Samuel de Champlain in 1604, and even Edward Cornwallis in 1749 during the founding of Halifax, all gained the Atlantic coast at this latitude. It is my belief that Mt. Aspotogan, which is flanked by two large bays, was an obvious feature that allowed navigators to know their exact latitude.

#### AMERINDIAN PRESENCE

Amerindians were the first occupants of Mahone Bay, perhaps 10,000 years ago, and are still present to this very day. History tells us that they came into the Bay each summer for the purpose of fishing, and then went inland for the winters. Shell middens, fishing weirs of tremendous lengths, and stone art work are what remains of their ancient activities.

#### PORTUGUESE OCCUPATION

The 1494 Spanish and Portuguese Treaty of Tordesillas established a line of demarcation extending from pole to pole which divided the newly discovered lands outside Europe between the Kingdoms

of Spain and Portugal. This demarcation line was 370 leagues (approximately 1110 miles) west of the Cape Verde Islands. By the authority of the Pope, lands to the west of this line were granted to Spain, and those to the east to Portugal.

Due to errors in cartographic and navigational knowledge during this period, the line intersected the coast of North America at an uncertain point in Nova Scotia. While history says Spain and Portugal planned a joint venture to actually measure the distance and to mark the shores of North and South America, there are no texts that would indicate that this trip ever happened. Cartographers of Spain and Portugal were required to place this treaty line on their maps. Depending on the country of origin, the line varies, with Portuguese cartographers moving the line west, and Spanish moving it east.

Few maps exist today that clearly identify the treaty line. The first map thought to show the line is known as

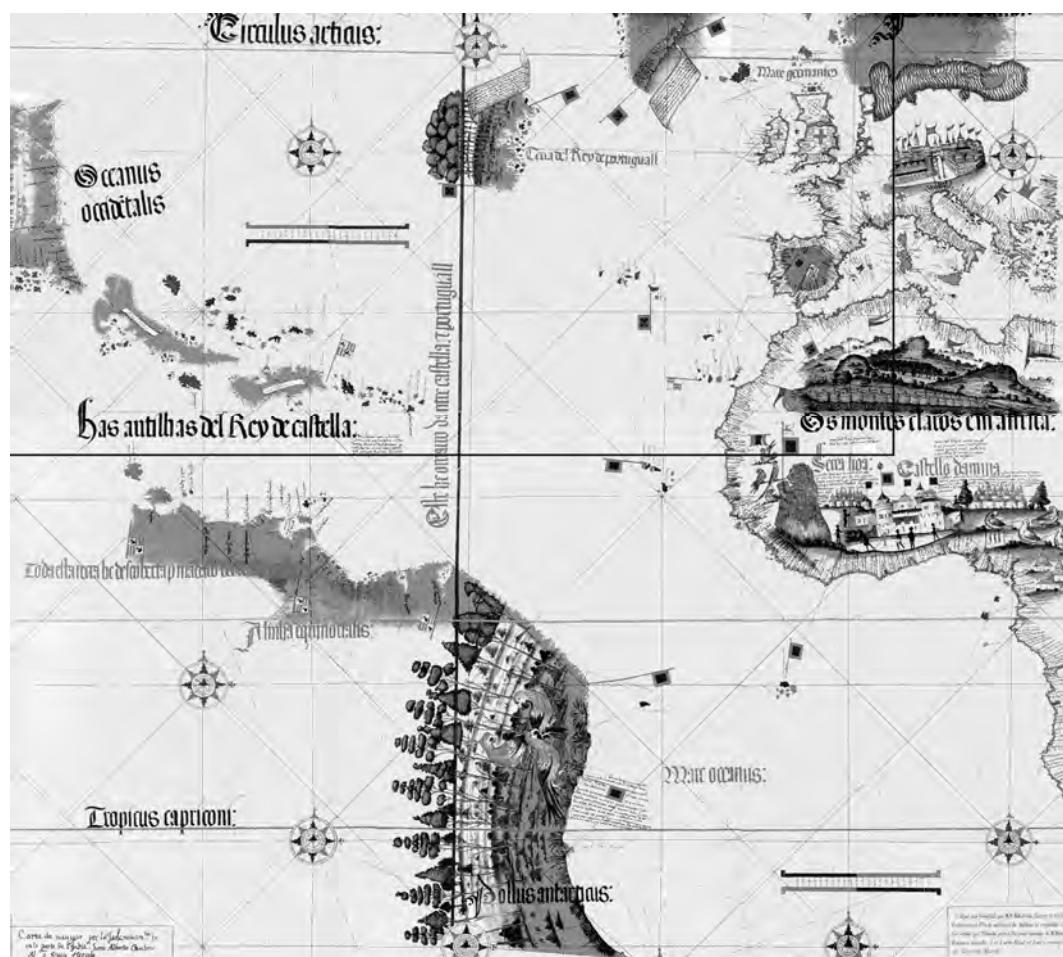


FIGURE 3. CANTINO MAP OF 1502 SHOWING THE TREATY OF TORDESILLAS DEMARCACTION LINE.

the Cantino map of 1502 (FIGURE 3). A map by Spanish cartographer Diego Ribero in 1529 gives Spain more land, while a 1554 map by Lopo Homen has the line giving Portugal more of Nova Scotia.

The Treaty of Tordesillas was beneficial to both Spain and Portugal, but more so for Spain, because it gave its fleets access to Portuguese ports such as the Azores. Any type of settlement by either country in Nova Scotia would have caused concern due to possible infringement into the other country's lands.

Spain showed very little interest in Atlantic Canada. Beyond the 1529 trip of exploration by Esteban Gomez, there is no evidence the Spanish Crown ever returned. Conversely, interest in Atlantic Canada was very high for Portugal, especially for inhabitants of the Azores

Islands. The explorations of the Corte Real and Lavrador interests are well known, while settlement attempts by the families of Fagundes and Barcelos, though recorded, are not. The Barcelos attempt was not even brought to light until the 1950s by Azores' Chief Archivist, Dr. da Lima.<sup>1</sup> Due to the concerns of infringement, it is possible at that time that both of these settlements were kept quiet outside of the Azores. By 1508, the Azorean family of Pinheiro de Barcelos was granted or claimed part of the Nova Scotia coast. We can tell, through period maps<sup>2</sup> and court documents, that two big double bays were given the designation *Gulfo* and were drawn at 44.5 degrees North latitude. This latitude precisely intersects Mahone Bay. Mahone and St. Margaret's Bays are the only two bays of close enough proximity and size that could correspond to the location of *Gulfo* (FIGURE 4).

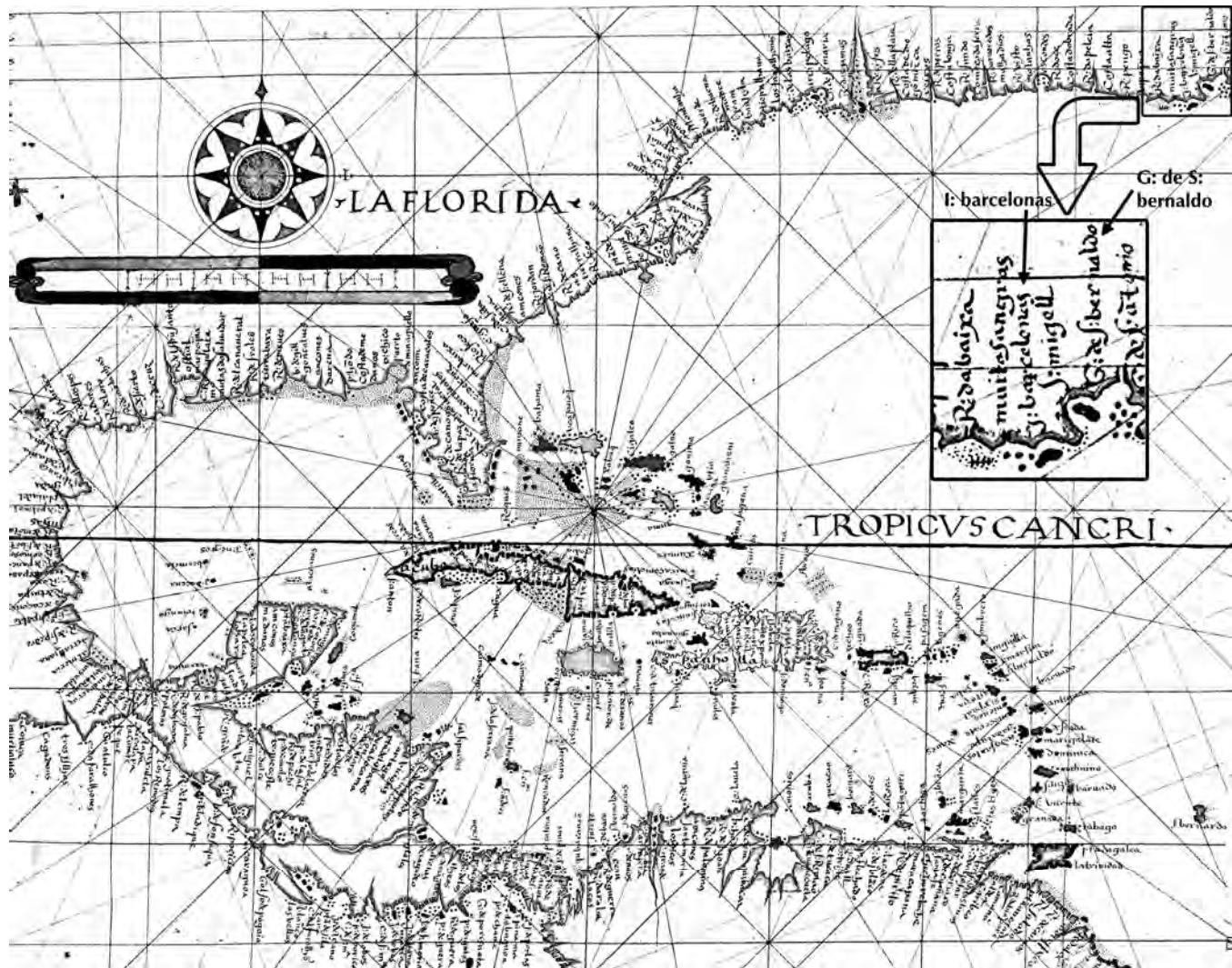


FIGURE 4. PORTUGUESE MAP OF THE ATLANTIC COAST OF THE AMERICAS FROM THE MID-SIXTEENTH CENTURY, BY VELHO, WITH AN INSET SHOWING AN EXPANDED VIEW OF G. DE S. BERNALDO AND I. BARCELONAS.

[The map shown in **FIGURE 4** is only one of three maps produced by Velho detailing Atlantic Canada. I encourage readers to visit my Website and view all three maps that portray this latitude.]

Documents<sup>3</sup> of 1568 still show the Barcelos family as being associated with this area. They were raising livestock for trade with whalers off Labrador and were mining lime for use as lime mortar to be sent back to the Azores. The following text is from a 1568 petition.

"Manoel de Barcelos Machado, who resides in this city of Angra in Terceira Island, says that he bought a new ship, whose master is Joao Cordeiro, to go and settle the Island Barcellona de Sam Bardao, in which discovery his late father and he spent more than 5000 cruzados, and in which they have (or he has) been breeding herds of cows, sheep, goats and swine..."

The Island Barcellona in question is indicated by the arrow in the inset in **FIGURE 4**. This is the same island identified by Dr. da Lima as being associated with the 1568 court documents—the Island of Barcellona of St. Bernard. The map clearly shows the Island being in the Gulf of Sam Barnaldo.

[Editor's Note: Sable Island historian and author Lyle Campbell avers that Barcellona is actually Sable Island (see <http://www.greenhorsesociety.com/History/History.htm>). Sable Island is located well off-shore of Nova Scotia as shown on **FIGURE 1**, whereas the island shown in the inset of **FIGURE 4** appears to be close inshore. Campbell supports his assertion in the following:

"As mentioned, a second Portuguese claim to Sable discovery was lodged. It came long after the alleged fact. The claimant, in 1568, was named Manoel de Barcelos. Manoel said

that he and his father Diogo had discovered the island. They named it Barcellona de Sam Bardão. ...Westward ventures had a long tradition in the Barcelos family. ...That they were exploiting an overseas island by the 1560s is quite likely.... Scholars have accepted Barcellona de Sam Bardão as Sable Island. This conclusion is based partly on old maps. Noteworthy written records also support it. (For instance, the writings of Hakluyt and Champlain.)"

Is it possible that the island shown on the Velho Map inset is actually Sable Island?

This family remained associated with the area until 1583, when records show the Azorean Portuguese withdrew from Atlantic Canada because they could no longer protect their activities. In 1580, the King of Spain claimed the crown of Portugal, and in 1583 he violently subjugated the Azores—particularly Terceira, the homeland of the Barcelos family—because they were home to the remnants of loyalists to Antonio the Prior of Crato, a claimant for the crown of Portugal. The last attempt by Portugal to maintain its claim to Nova Scotia, via cartography, can be seen in the 1583 map by Sebastiao Lopes (**FIGURE 5**).



**FIGURE 5.** PORTUGUESE MAP OF NORTH AMERICA BY SEBASTIAO LOPEZ, 1583, SHOWING THE FLAG OF THE KINGDOM OF PORTUGAL FIRMLY PLANTED ON THE ATLANTIC COAST OF NOVA SCOTIA.

Further evidence of Portuguese presence is a large hewn stone found on Oak Island. It is consistent with a third era *padrao* identified by Dr. Manuel da Silva because of its size, shape, the notch at one end, and traces of iron oxidation within the notch due to its being a receptacle for an iron cross. I have not yet been able to confirm the geological rock type, which appears to be either a form of slate or metamorphosed volcanic tuff. It appears to be quite distinct from the typical Halifax Formation slate. Metamorphosed volcanic tuff is found in the rare White Rock Formation in Nova Scotia, which is quite a long distance from Mahone Bay. It is, however, common in the Azores.

[Editor's Note: A *padrao* is a "large stone cross inscribed with the coat of arms of Portugal, that was placed as part of a land claim by numerous Portuguese explorers during the Portuguese Age of Discovery." See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Padr%C3%A3o>]

## FRENCH ACTIVITY

French presence along this section of the coast seems quiet during the period when Portugal maintained its claim. After the 1588 defeat of the Spanish Armada in its attempted invasion of Britain, French texts begin to hint of interest in the general area, although no text directly mentions it specifically. We can start with Champlain's narrative<sup>4</sup> of 1604 to show French activity and interest in the area of Mahone Bay.

Champlain was well aware of Portuguese activities in Atlantic Canada. However, he is most reluctant to directly mention them being connected to anything else other than Sable Island. I believe that Portuguese claims may have still been a concern to the crown of France. This was not Champlain's first trip to the New World nor his first trip to Canada, but it was his first trip to this area of Nova Scotia.

On this trip was Mathieu DaCosta, who was a person of African-Portuguese heritage<sup>5</sup>. Mathieu was contracted to act as an interpreter with the Indians. One must naturally wonder how and where he learned that skill.

Champlain writes that they initially departed France for Canso. The leader of this expedition, Pierre du Gua, sieur de Monts, changed his mind and set course for a place they would later call Port Mouton. Navigational

errors caused them to sight Sable Island, and on May 8, 1604, they arrived at latitude 44.5 degrees and named the place La Have.

Champlain scholars have theorized that missing narratives regarding the voyage along the coast from La Have to Port Rossignol were omissions from his original journals<sup>6</sup>. Given the prolific writings, drawings, and details that Champlain normally recorded, it seems odd that Champlain would spend three days at La Have but not write about it. Others have concluded that Champlain may have kept a parallel narrative for another patron. It is possible that the suspicious omissions were for the purpose of not mentioning Portuguese activities, as this was the exact place on the coast that the Barcelos family had claimed and had attempted to settle.

Champlain mentions the discovery of a wooden cross in another part of Nova Scotia, now called Parsonsboro. He attributes it to previous Christians being there<sup>7</sup>. The cross found by Champlain is consistent with a Portuguese presence. He could have reasonably known of the *padrao*, as the French adopted this cross raising practice from the Portuguese.

Champlain mentions the Mahone Bay area as he sailed north along the coast to Canso<sup>8</sup>. He named a series of large islands at the entrance to Mahone/St. Margaret's Bay as *The Martyrs*, because Frenchmen had once been killed there by the Indians.

A martyr in the Catholic sense was someone who died for his religious beliefs. To name an area *The Martyrs* raises the question as to whether Champlain might have attached a religious context to the Frenchmen who were killed there. I believe that the name was given because the Portuguese had named the two bays after saints. Although neither had themselves been martyrs, attaching that name to islands would have been consistent with maintaining a religious connotation, perhaps for good luck. In any event, Champlain gave the name *R. Ste. Marguerite* to the river at the head of St. Margaret's Bay.

After this mention by Champlain, French texts regarding this area go quiet until 1632, although there is a record of the Frenchman Pierre Lejune marrying a native woman from the La Have area circa 1617.

From 1632-1635, Knight Commander Razilly established his capital at La Have<sup>9</sup>, and logging efforts and exploration were recorded as told through Nicholas Deny

during that period<sup>10</sup>. Deny tells an incredible story of an island [such that] "...when a man set foot upon this island instantly a fire would seize upon his privy parts, and they would burn up, so the Indians said." There is no geological feature in this area that could explain fire coming from the ground. Did the Indians observe an underground mining chimney which crudely provided ventilation?

The following information indicates that the French maintained a presence, albeit not very large, in the area:

- ▶ 1658 - Le Borgne rebuilt the fort at La Have in 1658 with 58 men.
  - ▶ 1664 - France granted Emmanuel Le Borgne (Bourge) Du Coudray a seigneurie at La Have.
  - ▶ French Census records identified inhabitants in the area<sup>11</sup>.
  - ▶ On September 5, 1726, Jean Baptiste Guidry, Philippe Mius d'Entremont Jr, and Jacques d'Entremont Jr, seized the ship of Captain Samuel Daly of Plymouth, Massachusetts at Merliguesh (Lunenburg). The men were tried for piracy in Boston on October 15, 1726, and were executed by hanging the following month.

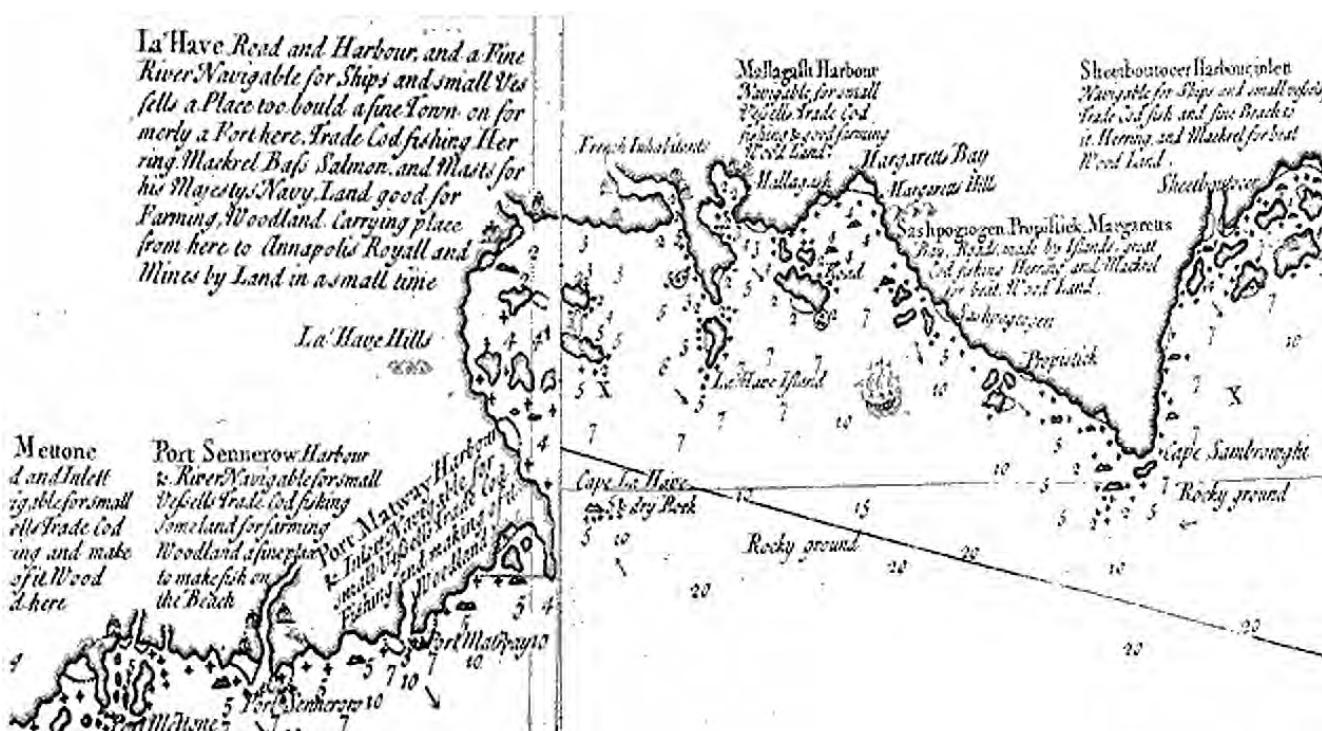
- ▶ The map fragment<sup>12</sup> dating to 1734 shown in **FIGURE 6** mentions French Inhabitants in the area of Mahone Bay.

BRITISH SETTLEMENT

Under the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, the peninsular part of Nova Scotia (or Acadia) was ceded to the British. The capital was established at Annapolis Royal and remained there until shortly after the 1749 founding of Halifax. Although many government documents from the period 1713-1749 have survived and were compiled into letter books by the Nova Scotia Archives early in the twentieth century, none mention or include any items of interest relating to the Mahone Bay area.

The English commenced settling the Mahone Bay area in 1753 with the founding of Lunenburg. That town was created as a result of growing disgruntlement by German and French Protestants in Halifax who had become increasingly dissatisfied because of broken promises of good farm land.

Later that year, several fishing companies from the Province of New York petitioned for land grants in Mahone Bay. Fishing agents John Gifford and Richard Smith were granted three islands, one of which was



**FIGURE 6.** FRAGMENT OF A MAP BY CYPRIAN SOUTHACK, 1734, THAT SHOWS FRENCH INHABITANTS IN THE AREA OF MAHONE BAY.

Oak Island. Modern day Rafuse Island was granted to another New York fishing company. Did these New Yorkers already have fishing operations established in Mahone Bay, thereby needing a grant to keep them, or did protection from soldiers in Lunenburg allow them to start a fishery?

In 1754, Ephraim Cooke was granted the lands at the mouth of the Mush-a-Mush, which later became the Town of Mahone Bay. Further in 1754, the “twenty wealthiest men” from New York sought to establish a community deep in the bay. The previously mentioned John Gifford acted as consultant for these men and provided recommendations on where to settle. This role as a consultant could speak to Gifford’s previous knowledge of the bay and might indicate he was fishing prior to the establishment of Lunenburg. The Governor could not promise protection for this proposed settlement, thus it was never established.

During 1757 and 1758, several private land grants were given for land around the bay and a few tracts along the Gold River. In 1759, a general invitation to New Englanders was made to come and settle Nova Scotia. Communities such as Chester, Horton, Truro, Onslow, and Liverpool all have origins rooted in this invitation. The people who responded would become known as “the Planters.” This generation of settlers plays an important part in Oak Island’s history.

The final groups to arrive in Mahone Bay were the United Empire Loyalists, followed by disbanded soldiers at the end of the American Revolutionary War. From 1776-1786, large and small groups of these people escaped the American Revolution and came to Halifax. Many were granted land in Chester and a few came for work. These Loyalists and ex-soldiers also played an important part in Oak Island history.

## IN CONCLUSION

While brief, the foregoing provides a basic introduction to the history of Mahone Bay, and forms an essential background to any historical investigation of activities regarding Oak Island. Additional references and further discussion are found at my Website, <http://www.oakislandtheories.com/>.

## ENDNOTES

1 “Boletim do Instituto Historico” Vol. XVIII (1963).

Originally discovered by Dr. de Lima, Chief Archivist. Translated by L.A. Vigneras, published as “The Voyages of Diogo and Manoel de Barcelos to Canada in the Sixteenth Century.” *Terrae Incognitae*, Vol. 5.

2 For example, maps designated HM44 f.3v, f.4, and f4v, shown on this Website:

[http://dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/dsgeh/heh\\_brf?Description=&CallNumber=HM+44](http://dpg.lib.berkeley.edu/webdb/dsgeh/heh_brf?Description=&CallNumber=HM+44)

3 Articles published in *Terrae Incognitae, The Journal for the History of Discoveries*, Volumes 1-32, 1969 – 2000. See [http://www.sochistdisc.org/bibliography.htm?P\\_HPSSESSID=452ad217db0fd71a457f23dca4af7452](http://www.sochistdisc.org/bibliography.htm?P_HPSSESSID=452ad217db0fd71a457f23dca4af7452)

4 See [http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9\\_96821&lang=eng&Page=0266&Size=3&query=&searchtype=](http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9_96821&lang=eng&Page=0266&Size=3&query=&searchtype=)

5 For more information about Mathieu DaCosta see <http://www.iocp.info/articles/dacosta.pdf>

6 See [http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9\\_96821&lang=eng&Page=0269&Size=3&query=&searchtype=](http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9_96821&lang=eng&Page=0269&Size=3&query=&searchtype=) and [http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9\\_96821&lang=eng&Page=0274&Size=3&query=&searchtype=](http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9_96821&lang=eng&Page=0274&Size=3&query=&searchtype=)

7 See [http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9\\_96821&Lang=eng&Page=0520&Size=3&query=&searchtype=](http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9_96821&Lang=eng&Page=0520&Size=3&query=&searchtype=)

8 See [http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9\\_96821&Lang=eng&Page=0525&Size=3&query=&searchtype=](http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9_96821&Lang=eng&Page=0525&Size=3&query=&searchtype=)

9 See <http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?BioId=34619>

10 See [http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9\\_96831&lang=eng&Page=0169&Size=3&query=&searchtype=](http://link.library.utoronto.ca/champlain/DigObj.cfm?Idno=9_96831&lang=eng&Page=0169&Size=3&query=&searchtype=)

11 1686 - National Archives of Canada MG1, Series G1, Vol. 466, No. 10 Microfilm No. C-2572

1698 - National Archives of Canada MG1, Series G1, Vol. 466, Nos. 18-20 Microfilm No. C-2572

1703 - National Archives of Canada MG1, Series G1, Vol. 466, No. 25 Microfilm No. C-2572

12 *The New England coasting pilot from Sandy Point of New York, unto Cape Canso in Nova Scotia and part of Island Breton by Cyprian Southack, 1662-1745.* Created and published in London, 1734.