Fortress Louisburg Is Restored

The military engineers of France and England planned and constructed their vital fortifications in the New World. At the end of Queen Anne's War in 1713, France gave up her claim to Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, except for the island of Cape Breton (Isle Royale) and planned a fortress at Louisbourg to control the sea approach to Quebec.

The original French settling party of 116 men included the French military engineer L'Hermitte from Newfoundland, as well as a militia and artisans to construct the fortifications. By January 1715, the colony had increased to over 700 and was on its way to becoming France's centre of military strength in the New World. Construction of the fortifications, however, proceeded slowly. Sieur de Verville was appointed as Engineer in 1717 and changed the construction practice from day labour by troops and artisans to working by contract. Construction then progressed more rapidly and, by 1745, had produced a massive fortress with 30-foot walls, an 80-foot ditch, 48 guns, and including protected external batteries.

Despite these fortifications, the British captured the fortress in 1758 during the Seven Years War after a seven-week siege by 16,000 troops supported by 150 ships. The end of the North American campaign of that war in 1760 saw the end of the French regime in New France. The British plan for the defence of its colony favoured the Halifax as the stronghold and, perhaps fearful of negotiations at future peace conferences, they completely destroyed the Louisbourg fortress by the end of that year.

Two hundred years later, the Canadian economy slumped as Europe had begun to recover from wartime hardship. In the late 1950s, the Rand Commission on Coal (1960) concluded that the coal mining industry in Cape Breton could not continue to be the backbone of the economy of the region and recommended that the agriculture, fishing and tourism sectors provide a new economic underpinning. A major escalation of the restoration of Fort Louisbourg was one project that would provide work for unemployed coal miners, give a boost to the tourism industry, and inspire the region culturally and intellectually.

The reconstruction continued for the next twenty years and cost twenty-five million dollars. By the time it was finished, they had rebuilt over a quarter of the original fortified town in what was described as the greatest restoration project in North America. This re-creation of an almost destroyed fortress was an invaluable testing ground for new techniques. The thoroughness of the preservation methods developed at Louisbourg set standards for future restorations of Canada's past.

During the restoration, craftsmen also learned to reproduce 18thcentury artifacts using the methods of the time and created a range of specialty products that are sold to 18thcentury heritage sites in many countries. The reproduction industry and Fortress Louisbourg tourism now sustain the town. As an example of Canadian creative innovation, Fortress Louisbourg rose from the rubble and became a resounding success.