

Making the Past Live At Louisbourg

By Kenneth Stickney

Louisbourg, Nova Scotia, was the scene of what was inevitably dubbed “the Woodstock of historical re-enactments” this summer. On the last weekend of July, 1,200 re-enactors and more than 20,000 visitors swarmed into the reconstructed city to commemorate the 250th anniversary of its capture by a New England army in 1745 and the 275th anniversary of its founding. It was certainly the largest re-enactment seen on the continent since the U.S. bicentennial in 1976.

Sandy Balcom, staff historian with Fortress Louisbourg National Historic Site, says planning for the event had begun several years before. Re-enactors had approached the staff about holding an event at the fortress because it is the largest and most authentic eighteenth-century site on the continent.

“We really started planning the event in the early '90s,” he says. “We

attended the Seven Years' War re-enactment at Fort Niagara in Lewiston, New York, in 1992 and we took part in the 1994 re-enactment at Quebec City in order to get experience with this kind of event.

“We wanted an appropriate anniversary to celebrate, and the 250th anniversary of its capture in 1745 was the right one. At the same time, we realized that many re-enactors are equipped for the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution, and it would be asking too much for them to re-equip for 1745, so we decided to celebrate the whole history of the city from 1720 to 1760.”

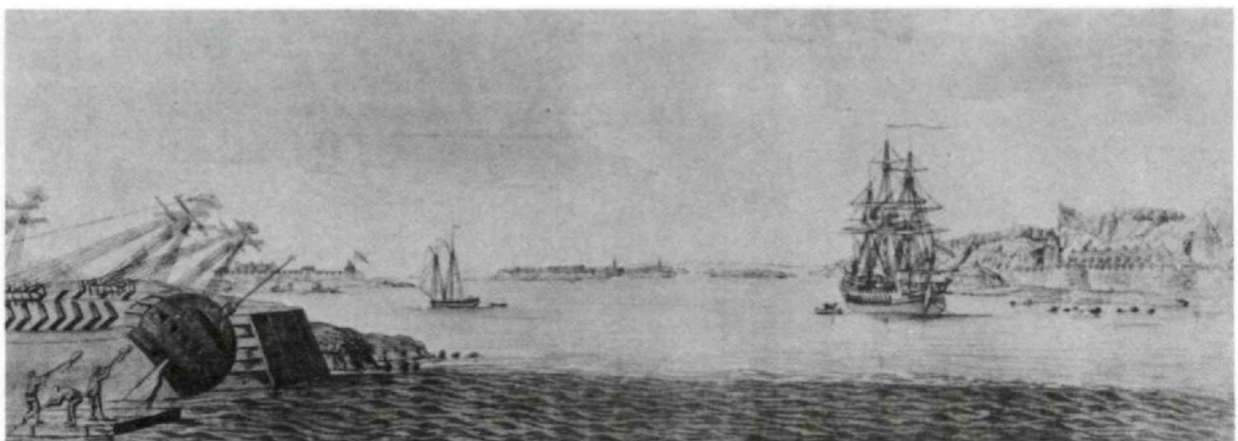
The response from re-enactors was overwhelming. About 1,200 came from across the continent — some from as far away as Oklahoma and Texas — to take part. Several new units were formed specifically for the event. A group in Ontario founded the grenadier company of

the 40th Foot, another in Halifax formed a new company of the 78th (Fraser's) Highlanders, and a third group in Sydney, Nova Scotia, created a unit of French-Canadian militia. Moreover, some existing units did re-equip to better represent the events of 1745. The 10th Massachusetts Regiment of the Revolutionary War altered their appearance back to 1745 and one man arrived from Rhode Island wearing the red uniform of the Swiss Regiment de Karrer, part of the city's garrison during the siege.

The event was held in conjunction with a parade of sail which brought 15 sailing ships to the fortress. Three anchored in front of the city while the others docked at the modern town of Louisbourg across the harbour where they could be boarded by tourists.

The effort certainly paid off, as more than 20,000 people visited the fortress over the three-day weekend.

VIEW OF LOUISBOURG from the NORTH EAST, 1777-1781.





The 78th (Fraser's) Highlanders, Louisbourg, summer 1995. Detachments came from the United States as well as from Montreal, Halifax and Ottawa.

(A good day in summer usually draws 2,000 people to Louisbourg.)

So heavy was the attendance that it caused parking, traffic and accommodation problems for miles around. By four p.m. on the first day, Sydney radio was warning: "If you aren't already at Louisbourg, don't go. The RCMP say they're turning everyone back from here on in." Shuttle buses were arranged to carry people from where they had parked to the visitor centre — a distance of up to six kilometres. Wags suggested that they should have sold T-shirts saying: "I survived the Siege of Louisbourg, 1995."

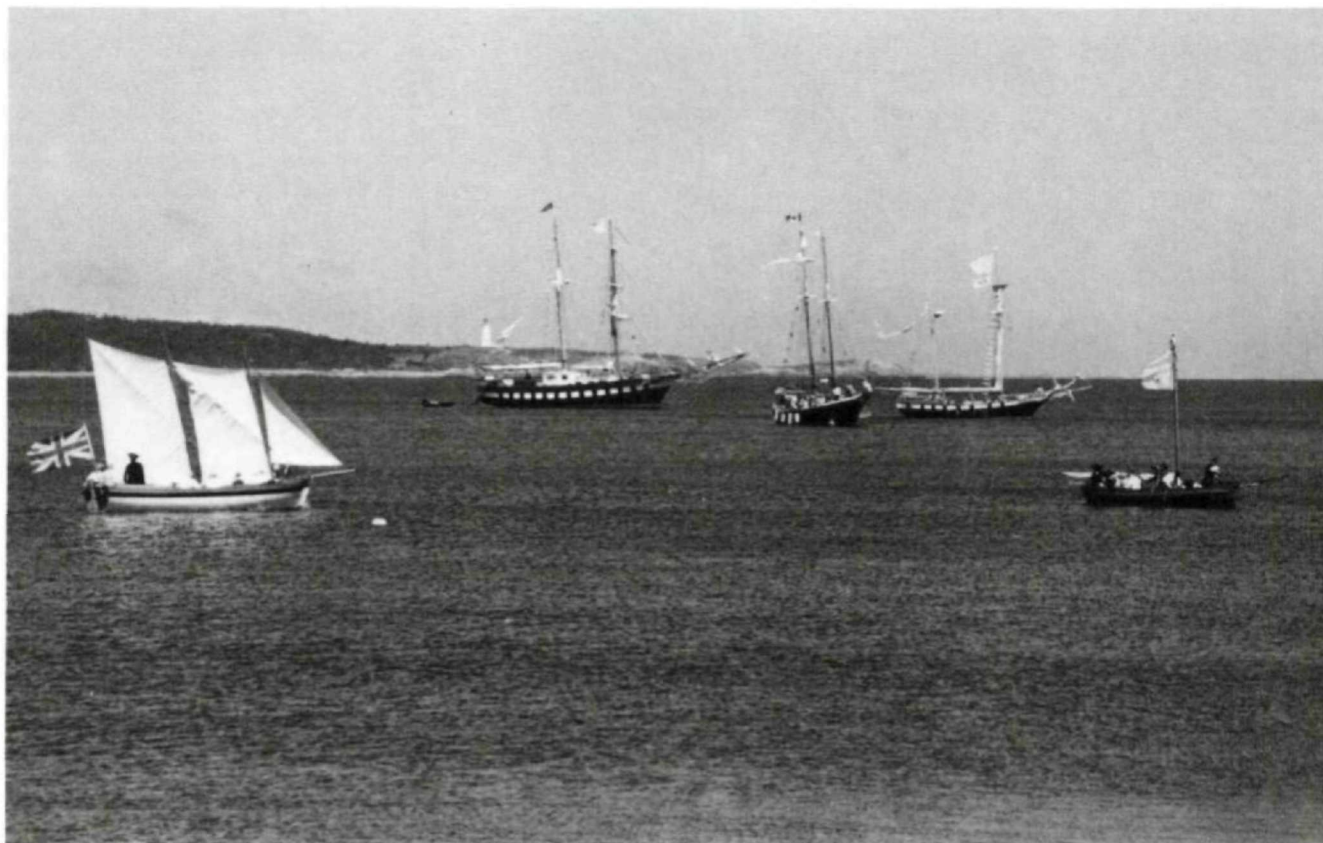
Visitors not only got to see Louisbourg's usual sights: they were treated to a grand display of

eighteenth-century military tactics throughout the weekend. Every day the massed British and American besiegers would form up to attack the fortress while the French and Canadian defenders would reply from the fortress ditch. The troops provided a colourful and variegated appearance. Among the attackers were the 78th (Fraser's) Highlanders, the 60th (Royal American) Foot, the South Carolina Independent Company, Roger's Rangers (in ranger green and Scottish bonnets), the New York Provincial Battalion (in green uniforms) and the New England Provincial Battalion (in farm clothes).

The most widely-represented unit among the defenders was les

Compagnies Franches de la Marine, the French regulars who were permanently stationed in North America. Louisbourg's present-day garrison represents this regiment, but they were joined by other Compagnies Franches from Montreal, Fort Ticonderoga in New York, and several French forts in the American midwest. Other defenders included le Regiment Roussillon Royal, le Regiment de la Reine, the militia of the parish of the Holy Family in Illinois and Canadian militia and Indians. The French artillery (in red) and musicians (in blue) made a striking contrast with the white and grey worn by the infantry.

The British and Americans "bombarded" the city with field guns



A parade of sail was held in conjunction with the re-enactment in the summer of 1995, with 15 sailing ships present. These three anchored off the fortress.

while the French replied with a single 24-pounder from the walls. The 24-pounder shook stomachs for a mile around and drew appreciative "oohs" from the audience whenever it went off.

The pageantry perhaps obscured how brutal was the history of Louisbourg. Constructed at enormous expense by the French government to defend the entrance to the St. Lawrence River, the city was captured by the New England army led by William Pepperrell in 1745. Nevertheless, it was returned to France by the Treaty of Aix la Chapelle in 1749. Repaired and resettled, it was again subjected to a siege by the British army commanded by Jeffrey Amherst in 1758. The images of the siege are unforgettable: the city toppling under the bombardment; the inhabitants huddling in the shadow of the battlements after their homes were destroyed. The citizens went down on their knees to beg the governor,

the Chevalier de Drucourt, to surrender, but he steadfastly refused, knowing that the longer he held Louisbourg, the less were the chances of the English sending an expedition to Quebec City that year. By holding out until the end of July, he indeed prevented Wolfe from sailing until 1759.

After its second capture, the British resolved to visit the fate of Carthage upon Louisbourg. Its inhabitants were deported to France and its fortifications were demolished in the summer of 1760. The city subsequently fell into ruin. It was reconstructed by the Canadian government between 1963 and 1982 at a cost of \$26 million.

Louisbourg's size and authentic appearance drew praise from the American re-enactors present. One from Illinois (dressed as a French priest) said: "They're reconstructing the French fort in Illinois, but it would fit into one corner of this place."

The big show has passed on, leaving the staff and permanent residents a little relieved. Nevertheless, they do hope to hold similar events in future. Sandy Balcom says it would be too ambitious to hope for a similar event every year, but the staff would like to see one like it every three to five years. ♦

Writer Kenneth Stickney lives in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

