A Brief History of Port Hood

Port Hood, the Shire Town of Inverness County, Cape Breton, has had a long history dating back to the earliest days of human settlement in this part of Nova Scotia. The first people who spent time along this shore were the Mi'kmaq—the aboriginal people who are native to this part of Canada. "Kek-weom-kek" ('sandbar')[†] was the name given to this area by the Mi'kmaq and was the first of a series of names given to Port Hood. The protected harbour with its sandy low-lying beaches was a natural stopping place for many early visitors.

There may have been Basque fishermen travelling along the coast as early as the 1500s. The earliest European name given to Cape Breton Island was 'baccalaos' which means 'cod' in the Portuguese language. The pursuit of the cod fishery provided the main impetus for European exploration and settlement along Canada's east coast for the first three centuries of our history. However, only sporadic summer fishing camps were established. No formal European impact was made until the French arrived in the 17th century. At the time of the building of Fortress Louisbourg, the French developed a stone quarry on what is now Port Hood Island (which at that time was a peninsula connected to the mainland by a low-lying isthmus). In the 1740s and '50s, this was the main quarry on Cape Breton Island for the finished or dressed stone used at Louisbourg for window and door casements. About 60 men worked here in the summer season at the quarry and the stone was sent by barge through the Strait of Canso to Louisbourg. There were also Acadian boat builders in the area who conducted a local fishery until the 1760s although they did not establish a permanent settlement.

On the early French maps of Ile Royale (Cape Breton), Port Hood was called by the name of "Justaucorps" or "Les Iles aux Justaucorps" in reference to the two islands just off shore. (Some maps show two islands while others show a peninsula and an island) A 'justaucorps' was the 18th century equivalent of a waistcoat or short coat that was the common form of men's attire at the time. Justaucorps (French for 'close to the body') was one of the few places named on the western side of Cape Breton in the 18th century and the name has lived on its variations—Jestico and

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† As Des Barres' map of Port Hood shows, Port Hood Island was once connected to the mainland by a substantial sandbar, which was later the location of a lobster cannery. However, a winter storm in the late 19th century washed the sandbar away. In the late 1950s, a road was constructed from the fishing wharf on the mainland to the fishing wharf on the island. Three days after the fixed-link opened, a storm washed it away. The structure was never rebuilt, but the remnants, known as 'The Breakwater', are still plainly visible.

Chestico. English maps of the 1760s and '70s even show the Port Hood area as the "Waistcoat Islands".

After the fall of Louisbourg in 1758 and the capture of Canada by the British, Cape Breton Island became a colony of Great Britain. The French of Louisbourg were deported and the remaining Mi'kmaq, Acadians and a few Irish families made up what was left of the sparse population. In the 1760s, the British commissioned Samuel Holland to do a complete survey of the entire Island. He found just a few fishermen in the area of Port Hood, and in addition to his surveying and writing up reports on the potential for settlement on the island, he renamed almost every cove, river and harbour. Jestico, as it appeared on some English maps, was renamed Port Barrington (after Viscount Barrington, Britain's War Secretary).

Most of the names that Holland suggested in his report were never used and older place names—whether Mi'kmaq or French—tended to survive. Jestico or Chestico remained in use until the arrival of the Loyalists by which time this area had been renamed Port Hood. During the late 1760s and early '70s, shortly after Holland's survey had been published, Joseph Frederick Wallet Des Barres, an English cartographer and hydrographer travelled the coastline of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island doing detailed maps and drawings of the marine topography. The best of their kind to date, these were published in a book called "The Atlantic Neptune". By this time, Justaucorps, Chestico, or Port Barrington, had been renamed Port Hood after British naval commander Samuel Hood who would later go on to become Lord of the Admiralty. By 1776, Port Hood, in its official form, finally appears as a place name on a map. Des Barres' map shows Port Hood harbour, Port Hood peninsula (today an island) and the outer Henry Island (named after Admiral Hood's son, Henry). (See [Des Barres' map of Port Hood](.).)

In 1786, the first of a group of New England Loyalists arrived at Port Hood—Captain David Smith, his wife Rebecca and their children. They were soon joined by the families of Matthew Hawley and Hugh Watts who were to make up the backbone of the first permanent settlement. Despite the loss of Captain David Smith on the winter ice floes in 1789, his family carried on and their many descendants still live in the area and have gone on to contribute to Canadian life in many fields.

In the 1790s, a number of Catholic Highland Scots arrived at Port Hood. Some had been settled in the Judique area for nearly 20 years after migrating over from Prince Edward Island. They must have been used to calling Port Hood by its older French name because "Justaucorps', according to their Gaelic pronunciation, became

'Seastico' (Shess- ti- co), a name that even appears in later Gaelic songs from the area. Soon, the names Campbell, Gillies, Fraser, MacDonald, MacDougall, MacNeil and MacEachen began to become predominant in the population. Some enterprising young Irish men were also drawn to Port Hood—men like the entrepreneur Edward Hayes and the brothers James and Dennis Murphy were early settlers who were able to give much to building the budding community. By 1818, when a detailed census of Port Hood was undertaken, there were nearly 170 people living in the area—one half were of Highland Scots origin, one-third were Irish and one-fifth either English or Loyalist.

Port Hood was chosen to become the seat of the County of Justaucorps in 1824 and a stone Court House was constructed the following year. It remained so when the name of the County was changed to Inverness in 1837. As County seat, Port Hood became the home of a County Academy and provided the services of a number of doctors and lawyers. A Catholic chapel and a Presbyterian mission served the spiritual needs of the local inhabitants in the early years of the 19th century. In the 1840s, Methodism came to Port Hood Island which became part of a larger congregation in the County. The prosperity of the latter part of the 1800s saw both the Catholic and Protestant congregations building new churches—St. Peter's (RC) in 1881 and St. Stephen's (now the United Church) in 1886.

During Port Hood's early days, settlers' lives revolved around the usual routine of farming and fishing. Businesses were established—shops, grist mills and wharves. The 1850s and '60s were busy decades when Port Hood was a port of entry for many American fishing vessels who came in from the Grand Banks to trade and sell their catches. A Customs office was established during this period of free trade with the United States. A prominent Irish merchant by the name of Peter Smyth (no relation to the earlier Smiths) built a fine stone Georgian house and operated a number of businesses in the village and elsewhere in the County.

Later on in the century, coal mines were developed and by the 1890s, Port Hood was an even more bustling centre of commerce and industry with at least four hotels, stores, a bottling company, a newspaper and several lobster canneries in operation. It competed with Arichat, Port Hawkesbury and Sydney as a shipping port with agricultural produce and fish being sent all around the province and as far away as Newfoundland.

The wealth that coal brought to the local economy even allowed Port Hood to get electricity in the very early years of the 20th century. A new Academy was

constructed (which burned in 1961), and two new churches serving the Anglican and Salvation Army communities were built. However, a major mine explosion in 1908 and later flooding in 1911 brought this period of prosperity to an abrupt end shortly before the First World War. Of course, the war enticed many local young men and some women to enlist in the Canadian services. Nearly ten percent of the local population enlisted in the years 1914-1918.

Life in Port Hood in the '20s and '30s remained fairly quiet. Younger people drifted away to find greener pastures in the cities of the mainland or the Canadian West. When World War II broke out, many more enlisted to serve in the army, navy, air force and merchant marine. After the war, many of the veterans came home to raise their families and to welcome some new settlers—European families like the Dutch whose lives had been severely disrupted by the war and who were looking for a safe haven here in Nova Scotia. While fishing, farming and coal mining still provided a modest living for many in Port Hood during these years, young people still "crossed the Causeway" after 1955 to resettle elsewhere in Canada or even in the United States. Port Hood's population has never attained the same levels it had in the early part of the 20th century but, despite the current out-migration to Alberta, it is holding its own in recent years.

Today Port Hood looks back on its history and heritage and celebrates the many strands of its culture which have been woven together to create what Port Hood is at this time—a maritime village on Cape Breton Island with long roots to its past.

Sourced from a web page written by: Catherine M. Gillies, Chestico Museum