

storms, shipwrecks and secrets



EPISODE DESCRIPTION

Islanders and the ocean have been connected for centuries, beginning with the Mi'kmaq who travelled in birch bark canoes. Before modern vehicles came into play, the water was basically a road. It was often quicker to travel by water than by horse and carriage - as we learn in this episode. But with the ocean comes danger. In this episode, we discover how many ships sunk off the coast of PEI - some as recent as the late 1900s.

Features guest interviews: Junior Peter-Paul, Georges Arsenault and Paul Gallant.

Ocean sounds. Rowing in canoe. Beach PLZ music introduces.

Welcome to The Hidden Island – a podcast where we talk about local Island history. My name’s Fiona Steele, and I’ll be your host for this journey.

Stay in the canoe. Rowing sounds. Ocean. Light wind.

It’s often easy to think about islands as being separate from the mainland. Isolated and on their own. I’m sure we all think of that every time we approach the bridge or the ferry. But what if you saw the ocean and the rivers as pathways, instead of barriers? Just think of everyone that’s travelled this way throughout history, and how many shipwreck remains are resting just off the coast of PEI.

Ocean, wind, canoe sounds faded away.

Today’s episode is all about islanders and the water. Before modern vehicles came into play, the water was basically a road. It was often quicker to travel by water than by horse and carriage. But if we want to talk about sea travel, it’s important to start at the beginning.

Junior: My name is Junior Peter Paul. I'm originally from Elsipogtog First Nation but I reside here in Prince Edward Island because all my kids are from here and my grandkids. So, I live on Prince Edward Island.

Junior Peter-Paul is a Mi’kmaw elder. I went to visit him at Greenwich, where he spends all day in a traditional Mi’kmaq camp with a wigwam, birch bark canoe, and other objects that would’ve been used daily in Mi’kmaq communities until relatively recently. Junior’s there to help visitors learn about Mi’kmaq history on the Island.

Junior: When my friend Todd Labrador came over the first time we built that wigwam you know, it's quite interesting. I felt the connections with my ancestors, you know, 100 years ago, or even more two or 300 years ago, more than that even. But the connection of being with the nature, making me realize there's a lot more life in nature, when you build your own home as a wigwam, when you build your own canoe, when you make things, when you're harvesting, when you're berry picking or whatever, hunting, trapping – it's all here. And that's, that's all we had. Yeah, you know, and then when the Europeans came along, and then that's when everything changed, you know, we weren't allowed to hunt or anything like that, so that's why that's that treaty kicked in, in order to, to allow us to be able to hunt and fish anytime we want. And this still is still, that's, we're still having a little struggle with it. People are against it. But you know, we started that way, you know, our ancestors started that way. That was our livelihood. So they're slowly trying to take that away from us. So that's why I do this now to fill in the education with the students and the people that, you know, how we lived.

EPISODE SCRIPT

Bold = interview quotes

Italics = sound effects

Regular = my narration

I asked Junior about Mi'kmaq ways of life before European contact, and how they used the ocean and rivers for travel.

Junior: the ways of life in their days you know, is you're right it is canoes. The birch bark canoes was our main transportation along the rivers, along the bays, ocean canoes to come across from mainland to get to the island. That was their main transportation of getting to things you know, harvesting materials of birch bark, to make wigwams, to build canoes, making containers or stuff like that. And also, it was their transportation in the rivers to get to the fields for berry picking, strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, whatever, whatever is good for their for eating, and also going up river and deep woods and doing trapping and hunting. And so the canoes were the main thing back in their days it was the water was our transportation to get to places

Fiona: right and so because this is radio people won't be able to see so can you describe what the canoes would look like for someone who wouldn't have seen one?

Junior: The canoes, they're made out of birch bark, all binded up with spruce roots, black spruce trees, they're harvested. Birch bark is harvested, you know, it all depends on the temperature, the time of the year. Spruce, you can start harvesting them as soon as the frost heaves, you know, so you can do that pretty much anytime and they would build their canoes all natural from the woods.

Fiona: And has the process of making canoes, has it changed at all over the years?

Junior: The process, nope, hasn't changed. We're still using the same material, same design - the Mi'kmaq designs of the canoes. They're all different sizes and shapes of canoes of each different communities, the nationalities.

Fiona: So the ones that you've made, what have they been like? For sizes?

Junior: Well, the first one that I made with my friend was Todd Labrador. He came over here five years ago and built the canoe, I built it with him and was a 16 footer you know, the river canoe.

The 16-foot canoe Junior built with his friend Todd is at Greenwich and he takes it out in the water a couple of times a year. Those canoes would've been used daily hundreds and thousands of years ago, whereas the ocean canoes Junior mentioned were more seasonal. They would've been used in late spring, summer, and fall before it became too cold.

Junior: And the difference with the ocean canoe is they're built a lot longer: 20 footer or 24 footers, and a bit wider, and it's got a hump in the center. And that's for the big waves, you know, and it's got to sail on it and it will canoe across the ocean, so New Brunswick to PEI or PEI to Nova Scotia. I've heard stories they were canoeing to Newfoundland even. So those are two different types of canoes that we use.

Over winter, Junior said the canoes were stored underwater.

Junior: Yeah, I've heard the stories. You know, my friend taught told me that they used to store them underneath the ice, sink them down in the water, when the ice freezes over they stay there. It's just to keep the material you know, I don't know how to say it, but to keep it away from the elements, you know, from the heat and whatever.

Fiona: So they'd be fine over winter?

Junior: Yeah, after spring's out, they'd bring them back out. Now it's just as just as fresh. It stops from getting dried up too much, you know and getting brittle.

Because these canoes are designed to be used all the time, Junior said they perform a lot better when they're in the water often.

The Mi'kmaq weren't the only people on the Island who travelled the waters, although they were the first. If we skip forward to when the Acadians were living on the Island, water travel was also a main form of transportation for them.

Georges: It's kind of our highway, like for our ancestors. And I often say that, you know, people say, 'Oh, you're isolated, where you live on an island.'

You might remember Georges Arsenault from episode 1. He's a historian who focuses on Island Acadian history.

Georges: But in those days, those who were living on an island and had a boat, it was easier for them to travel long distances. Those who were living inside the continent, you know, you could take a river, but you know, you couldn't easily go 15 miles in the woods, you know, you had to travel by water, that was the highway of the time. So that's part of our history. And that's part of the way my ancestors traveled, you know, up to the 19th century, especially, and then maybe a bit also in the first part of the 20th century. But the sea is magic, you know, it can be rough, it can be deadly, but also it can be very calming. And often when I have a hard time sleeping, instead of counting sheep, I fixed my mind on a sailboat and seems to calm me or instead of thinking of things I had to do, or things that didn't go well, whatever, I just tried to concentrate on either being on that sailboat or watching it from the beach, and that seems to come.

When Georges talked about the sea being deadly, he wasn't exaggerating. If you find a map of the all the shipwrecks around PEI, it's kind of overwhelming. There's hundreds of boats that sunk – and those are just the ones we know about.

One storm in Island history is responsible for the sinking of almost 100 boats: The Yankee Gale. It's called that because most of the ships lost were American vessels.

Let's set the scene.

Wind. Ocean. Footsteps in grass. Birds. Trees moving.

It's Thursday, October 2, 1851. You're standing on the shore of Cavendish, and you can see anywhere from 50 to 300 boats. Most of them are American because, for the most part, Islanders aren't fishing that much yet. Ed MacDonald wrote in *The Island Magazine* that "From a distance, the Yankees made an impressive sight, with their black hulls and their white cotton sails spread out like summer washing along the skyline. At night, the effect could be magical."

A Saint John newspaper from the time period wrote: "At night, when the fleet is safely anchored, the lanterns lighted on each vessel and swinging upon the shrouds, one may fancy himself looking upon some huge city lying in repose, with its lamps all trimmed and burning "

You're watching these boats, and because you're watching history 170 years later, you know most of them will be fighting for their lives this time tomorrow night.

Piano music starts.

Friday, October 3 comes. It's a fine day, warm for the season. There's an old superstition among New England fisherman that nothing important should be done on a Friday because it's unlucky. Despite this, hundreds of boats continue to fish.

In late afternoon, the weather changes.

Natural sounds die out. Music continues. Green Park Sea Shanties start.

Ed MacDonald writes: "Around 4 p.m., the breeze died, and a glassy calm settled over the waters." The distant sky looked dark, and hundreds of seabirds could be heard making their way to land.

By the time many fishermen sensed the storm coming, there was no breeze to sail for shelter.

Wind picks up, rain and bird wings introduce.

At dusk, a southern wind did pick up, but it wasn't helpful for the fishermen because it kept pushing them away from the shore. Then, the wind switched directions to become northeast – where the worst Island storms traditionally come from. By now, the wind was rising to a gale, accompanied by hard rain.

The seas were wild, and it was pitch dark because the Island government had yet to invest in any lighthouses on the north shore.

Ed writes, "All through that first, terrible night, most of the mackerel boats held on where they were. Dawn came and with it, a sort of half-light. But the gale raged on. All day Saturday, the devil's brew of rain, wind, and sea battered the fleet. It was too much, too long. Gradually, danger turned to disaster. Death walked the waters. It found the fishermen everywhere. On vessels driven ashore and hammered to splinters on rocky headlands. On vessels found at the feet of the sandhills. On vessels run down by other schooners or capsized at sea."

Music fades, wind calms, ocean calms.

It was Sunday evening before the storm finished. Estimates vary, but anywhere from 80 to 120 ships were lost. Up to 250 men could have drowned. And that's only one storm. There's been countless other shipwrecks, and people haven't forgotten. Georges spent time studying Acadian folk ballads called "complaintes" that capture different moments in history to remember.

Georges: Studying these ballads, these complaintes composed by Island Acadians, about 60 per cent of them are about drownings, either when fishing or traveling by ship. The oldest one on that theme dates back to 1835. My grandfather's great grandfather on my mother's side drowned during a storm, when he was sailing from Tignish to Bouctouche, New Brunswick. His wife was from there and she wanted to go home to visit relatives and they got caught in a storm and finally, he drowned. She didn't. And a very old ballad was composed on that, and I was able to record a few verses. And I liked the melody of it. It's very it sounds a bit like the the old church music used to hear if I can remember the melody:

(signing in French)

It's four or five verses of that. And when they recorded it, I had no idea that he was my one of my ancestors on the Perry side. And it's just later when I was doing the genealogy of Perry that I've found out that he was the grandfather of my grandfather's grandmother, I think. Yes, I got quite a few generations back. And then there's another song about the drowning of a young fisherman from Rustico, Firmin Gallant in 1862. And it's a very long ballad, and it has been recorded to different places in the Maritimes. I found it on the Island, quite a completed version in a song, which was composed probably not long after the drowning. It mentioned that that young man is from this Ile St Jean because in French, even if the island had been renamed Prince Edward down in 1799, for the Acadians they still kept calling their island Ile St Jean in French. Even until about 20 years ago, people in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, they still used the words 'Ile St Jean' when referring to Prince Edward Island, but anyway, the song goes, just the first verse. (signing in French) and goes on about 15 verses.

Acadians are still composing these folk ballads today, too. The most recent one Georges heard tell of was composed in 1976, again about a man who drowned.

Sea travel and shipwrecks often go hand in hand. But not always. I asked Junior Peter-Paul if he knew any stories of Mi'kmaw people being lost at sea long ago.

Junior: No, I haven't heard of anything like that. You know, the laws of indigenous people, they're very skeptical of, you know, they pay attention. If they know it's going to be a storm or something, they're not going to go out. And they'll find that perfect day and they know it's going to be a nice calm day. And that's what they'll attempt to canoe around.

But not if it is a major real storm. They wouldn't go anywhere. But sometimes, you know, they end up hitting the small storm and that's why we use the ocean canoes and with the sails, helps them go with the waves.

You know, our ancestors, they seem to know what the weather's going to be like, you know, they're - we're very careful with things like that.

Once commercial fishing came into play, people started sailing into the ocean more. The water became something to exploit, not travel on and fish to survive like Junior Peter-Paul talked about. So, it makes sense there'd be much more danger when you have 500 boats in the water determined to take all they can, rather than a community that only takes what they need short term.

In any case, the fisheries became a central industry on PEI.

I talked to Paul Gallant, author of a book titled, "Souris by the Sea, Home of the Dragger Fleet." Draggers are another word for Trawler boats, and they were fishing vessels. In the second half of the 1900s, Souris was known as Home of the Dragger Fleet because so many Trawler boats fished out of there.

Paul: Most of the draggers from Souris were built over Port Greville, Nova Scotia in the shipyard there and they're wooden draggers around 60 feet, 62 feet the last one, the Fan & Joanne was built in 1960. It was 65 feet long. But then after that, the steel draggers came into being because they were bigger and more efficient. And they are 92 feet steel, and they were built over in Pictou, Ferguson industries.

Even though technology became more advanced over the years, there's always danger when you work in the water. I asked Paul about shipwreck stories in the twentieth century, and there's been many.

Paul: Oh, the first major one back in 1945, after the war was over was the Assiniboine on South Lake. It was a class destroyer and a world war effort. And it was being towed from Quebec to Baltimore. And the tow line broke coming around East Point. And anyway, there's a seven man skeleton crew aboard and they managed to get ashore. And it wasn't like a violent storm - it was the tow line issue.

Paul: The HMCS Assiniboine and then and the next major one – and probably more major – is the fact that we had the Iceland II that was leased by my dad's company. In 1967 February 2, I believe. And it went ashore over in Cape Breton and ten crewmen were lost. Most of them from Souris, and so that was that was a sad day for the town.

Paul's Dad's company was Eastern Fisheries based in Souris. A terrible storm kicked up that February night, with waves reaching 45 feet high and wind gusts reaching 100 miles per hour.

Paul: The owner was Jonas Bjornsson. He is an Icelander. He was home in Iceland at the time. It went aground during the night, washed ashore, or they were off-course trying to make harbor at Louisburg and he just missed the run I guess. And he ran full steam ashore apparently. And it was a rough night, it was cold, and the ship wasn't noticed until next morning – a day or so later.

Paul: Due to the weather, the rescue crew could not do anything. They had boats and a helicopter. And then Sunday, the bodies were found along the shore. There was only one man on board. And they managed to retrieve him.

In 2017, 200 people gathered in Souris to remember the 10 men who died on the 50th anniversary of the Iceland II's sinking. Even though storms like the Yankee Gale that destroyed a hundred ships haven't happened recently, there's still a risk to working on the water.

If you're walking along the beach in PEI, there's a strong chance you could find shipwreck remains. With the hundreds of ships lost at sea, sometimes pieces find their way onto the beach. In July of 2017, a woman named Ellen MacLeod was walking along the Kildare shore at low tide when she found something unusual. What looked to be dozens of short posts were sticking out of the sand in a huge semi-circle. Natural shifting of the sands over the years had made them become visible. While it's unclear what boat these pieces came from, a local historian Allan MacRae believes they're from a schooner called the "Rival." This boat was wrecked during the Yankee storm. That's the same storm we talked about earlier, which means it could be 170 years old.

And I know we talk about history being this dead thing you can't see, but in this case you can. Just imagine how long those pieces were hidden underneath the sand before they finally became visible.

So, think of that the next time you go for a walk and keep your eyes peeled.

Theme music comes up

Thank you for listening to this episode! The PEI Museum and Heritage Foundation is a not-for-profit organization that relies on the generosity of supporters to help us fund projects like this podcast. If you'd like to become a supporter and make donation, please visit us a peimuseum.ca and click on the Support tab. Every little bit helps.

Thank you to Junior Peter-Paul, Georges Arsenault, and Paul Gallant for your time in being interviewed. Also, those sea shanties you were hearing? That's Caitlin Paxon and her team at Green Park Shipbuilding Museum and Yeo House. Also, thanks to our sponsors Nimrods and Upstreet Brewing.

Shoutout to Adam Gallant, who is responsible for our intro music. Talk to you soon!

ADDITIONAL READING

"Ni'n na L'nu" *A. J. B. Johnston and Jesse Francis*

"Shipwrecks and Seafaring Tales" *Julie Watson*

"Shipwrecks and Sailors" *Robert Parsons*

"Souris By The Sea: Home of the Dragger Fleet" *Paul Gallant*