

HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA

TITLE: Paspébiac Buildings and the Charles Robin Company

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Charles Robin was born on 30 October 1743, at St. Ouen's on the Island of Jersey. He and his two older brothers, Philip and John, began a fishing post at Arichat on Cape Breton Island in 1765. In 1766 Charles Robin scouted the Bay of Chaleur and saw its good commercial prospects. The next year Charles Robin returned, established a post on the barachois at Paspébiac and began trading fishing supplies and dry goods to the French inhabitants in return for fish and furs.

Charles Robin spent every spring, summer and autumn (and some winters) on the Bay of Chaleur from 1767 to 1778 when he was driven out by privateers from the revolting American colonies. Likewise John Robin directed the business at Arichat until 1778. Philip Robin remained at home to direct the European end of the business. By 1778 Charles Robin had become the leading merchant on the Bay of Chaleur. By residing on the fisheries he was able to out-strip numerous competitors many of whom were only agents of investors from Quebec and England. Charles Robin, on the other hand, had a share in the Company and wide authority to make policy decisions on-the-spot. From 1766 to the early 1780's his operations on the Bay of Chaleur were known by the name of the Robin, Pipon Company of Jersey: the Pipon family and a few other Jersey families were also share-holders in the firm. Shortly after Charles Robin returned to Paspébiac in 1783 (i.e., after the Revolutionary War) the business took the name of the Charles Robin Company (though several Jersey families continued to hold shares in it). The Robin operations at Cape Breton Island continued but on a lesser scale and under an agent. John Robin did not return to America but stayed home with his wife and daughters. Charles Robin never married but Philip Robin had three sons, Philip Jr., John and James, who soon came out to learn the family business under their uncle Charles. The latter did not leave the Bay of Chaleur from 1783 until his retirement in 1802. By 1802 he controlled virtually all the fish caught and cured between Gaspé Bay and the mouth of the Restigouche. Robin's fanatical dedication to efficiency and good marketing techniques permitted him to surpass all competition. Every year he sent four to six ship-loads of fish to Spain, Portugal and sometimes the United States. His efficiencies allowed him to survive the war which ravaged his European markets from 1792 to 1802. In the previous war (1778-1783) all commerce had ceased and many people in Gaspé starved. This time, however, Robin was able to find ways to continue exporting fish and employing people.

Charles Robin consolidated his hold on the Gaspé region in the 1780's by gaining control of many of the best fish-curing beaches for his Company; by the 1790's the people who lived on the remaining beaches were trading their fish to him in return for credit in his stores. In 1791 he began a ship-yard at Paspébiac: turning out a new sea-going ship every two years, he did not have to depend on war-torn, ship-scarce Europe for vessels to take his fish to market. With his economic influence he also gained a good measure of political power; he was able, for example, to control the election of representatives to the Provincial Assembly.

When Philip Robin Jr. took over the Charles Robin Company in 1802 the C.R.C. almost totally controlled the economy of Gaspé. Philip Robin Jr. expanded the C.R.C.'s fisheries into New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Labrador and expanded its markets into Italy and Brazil. By the time he retired (c. 1820) the C.R.C. was one of the most important commercial enterprises on the Atlantic Coast. Charles Robin died in Jersey in 1824; Philip Robin Jr. died in Switzerland in 1841. The C.R.C. remained in the hands of the family for many more years but was run by agents sent out to Paspébiac from Jersey.

The "truck" system of credit begun by Charles Robin (wherein cash was never used) continued in Gaspé until the end of the 19th Century despite the criticisms of many people. It was estimated in 1830 that 90% of the Gaspé population was in debt to the C.R.C. The Company also continued to hold a strong political influence for a large portion of the 19th Century. The major business principles which Charles Robin had formulated were continued for generations. The C.R.C. faced no appreciable competition until the 1830's when a few new companies were founded by Jerseymen who had been trained in the C.R.C. These Companies followed the Charles Robin business principles too.

In 1892 one of these firms amalgamated with the C.R.C. to form the Charles Robin Collas Company. In 1910 further changes produced the Robin, Jones & Whitman Company with its headquarters at Halifax instead of Jersey. The firm is still operating under that name but the people of Gaspé continue to refer to it as "The Robins". The Company today has its headquarters at Paspébiac and is directed by people of Jersey ancestry. During the 18th and 19th Centuries Paspébiac was always the Canadian headquarters of the Company.