**New-Land Magazine, Vol. 31, Spring-Summer 1977**

**Robert Carter, the Man Who Spearheaded the**

**Defence of Ferryland in the Year 1762**

**By**

**PJ. Wakeham[[1]](#footnote-1)**

In reading through Newfoundland history we find few names that stand out like that of Robert Carter, the defender of Ferryland. The tremendous part he played in resisting the French upon his settlement, and in the recapture of St. John's in the year 1762 makes history reading very interesting. In that episode Carter proved himself to be a man of great courage and determination.

Like other attacks the French made on Newfoundland, the 1762 invasion was a mere echo of events of great importance in another part of the world. It was not so much that the French wanted Newfoundland at that particular time, but if they had it, they could use their influence to great advantage in future deals with England. Newfoundland, in the eyes of the French Government, was something to be played around with in a much larger sphere. France and England were at war at that time, and France had experienced a few victories and she thought that it might be a good time to conclude a peace agreement with Britain. With Newfoundland in her possession, she would use that to drive a better bargain with England when they sat down to the peace table. With that thought in mind, they hoped to achieve their objective as they needed badly a piece of territory in North America. The French knew that Newfoundland was practically destitute of and that its defences had fallen into a state of decay and the garrison at St. John’s contained less than sixty officers and soldiers at that time.

History says that in the Spring of 1762, the Count D’Haussonville with thirty-two officers and seven hundred troops slipped away from France in four ships under Admiral De Ternay. The departure did not, however, pass unnoticed by England and Sir Edward Hawke was sent with some ships to intercept them. A thick fog enabled the French to break away from their pursuers and on the 24th of June they landed at Bay Bulls and marched over land to St. John's, arriving on the 27th. There was, at that time, but one English warship in the port, the “Grammont” a sloop carrying twenty-two guns. The Town fell an easy prey to the French who commenced at once to repair the four remaining forts and to erect new defences on Signal Hill. The Towns of Carbonear and Trinity were also taken by the French as they continued their sweep along the shores of the bays.

In the Town of Ferryland, needless to say, the landing of the French at Bay Bulls gave the citizens cause for alarm, for Ferryland had on previous occasions felt the heavy heel of the invader - in 1673, 1694, 1696, and 1705. Robert Carter had not seen any of those invasions but doubtless he had heard the story of Captain Holman's heroic defence in 1694, and perhaps it was Holman's example that inspired him at that time to emulate that heroism.

Robert Carter had been given a grant to the Isle au Bois which lies off the settlement of Ferryland and to this Isle now, he urged all the fishermen of Ferryland and nearby places to go with their families. He had had several cannons mounted there and it was his intention to put up a strong defence and fight the French to the last man. Each volunteer had been issued a musket and ammunition. Robert Carter was a businessman and to the Isle au Bois he moved all his stocks of provisions to sustain the three hundred and fifty souls who had taken refuge there for what might prove to be a long and difficult siege. All the people remained on the Isle au Bois for the whole summer, from the 24th of June until the 9th of October, at which time it was thought that the threat of invasion had passed.

In pursuing the history of that invasion, it seems that Robert Carter was a great warrior: He was not content with preparing the defence of the Isle au Bois, but we find him gathering together all the shallops and boats he could find in the area and calling for volunteers to accompany him to Bay Bulls to give battle to the enemy who had dared to invade Newfoundland. The larger boats numbered about one hundred and Carter led the way in his own boat, in the bow of which he had mounted a small brass cannon. The fishermen who manned the boats of that remarkable little flotilla were undoubtedly courageous men for their armament consisted of sealing guns and muskets. We can visualize that their faces were grim with patriotic determination as they sailed along the shore to Bay Bulls — they whole-heartedly agreed with their leader that "attack is the best form of defence".

Although the men in that little flotilla were a courageous lot, it was perhaps a lucky thing for them that when they arrived at Bay Bulls the French had left for St. John's, for a few hundred inexperienced men armed with only sealing guns and muskets would have proven to be an easy target for the well-trained soldiers on Count D'Haussonville’s ship, not to mention the heavy armament on De Ternay’s man-of-war. Perhaps we could say that the men in that flotilla were disappointed at having missed an encounter with the enemy, for no doubt they would have liked to have discharged a few shots at a much larger ship of war. With the enemy having left for St. John's, Carter and his men turned around and sailed back to Ferryland. It seems that they only arrived back in time, for two of the French ships had been ordered by De Ternay to cruise up and down the coast to capture all the settlements of importance. Ferryland being one of the larger settlements, he wanted any resistance that might be there wiped out. It was only a few hours after Carter and his flotilla arrived back at the Isle au Bois that these two ships hove in sight and bore down upon the settlement of Fern land.

It took but little time for the defenders of the Isle au Bois to get to their posts. The men were divided up at each cannon, the remainder took their muskets and awaited a signal from their leader. The women lined up behind the men to pass along the ammunition as it was needed, for the plan was to make all the guns fire as quickly as possible. They were to be discharged as often as human fingers could operate them. Robert Carter was a calm, cool commander. He strode back and forth amongst his men, at the same time keeping his eyes peeled towards the sea, waiting for the right moment to give the order to fire. He was determined to take the two large warships by surprise and wanted his initial blast of gunfire to be the first warning the enemy should have of their presence on the Isle. Cautiously the two ships sailed in towards the settlement, and when Carter judged them to be well within range of his guns, he gave the order and the cannon roared. There is a tradition in the Carter family which has come down through successive generations that it was a cannonball from a gun fired by Robert Carter's wife that brought down the foremast of one of the enemy ships and made her a sitting duck, a perfect target for the guns of the Isle au Bois. In an account of that battle, it is recorded that Mrs. Carter was a whirlwind of energy as she passed amongst the men during that attack. She personally passed ammunition along to the gun crews and cheered the women by her example.

From the information that can be gleaned on that historic battle, it would seem that the defenders of the settlement of Ferryland put up a tremendous battle, beating off two strongly armed ships without any loss of life. The French, it seems, did not fare very well in that engagement and after suffering some losses they had to break off the engagement. They turned their ships around and headed away from the area under the pressure of sail. The moment they broke battle, Robert Carter waved his arms to his men and they followed him quickly back into the boats to give chase to the retiring ships It is a legend that Carter's wife insisted upon going with her husband in his boat and it would seem that no power on earth could stop her. By now the breeze had freshened and there was no way that Carter's little flotilla could overtake the fleeing warships. They returned to the Isle au Bois and rejoiced over the great victory they had won.

At about the same time that the French were landing at Bay Bulls for their overland march to St. John's, it so happened that the H.M.S. "Syren", under the command of Captain Douglas, was cruising along the coast near Cape Race. On being informed by some fishermen that the French had captured St. John's, he put into St. Mary's Harbour and commandeered two vessels, the "William" and the sloop "Bonetta". These he sent out to cruise around outside to intercept Governor Graves who was expected to arrive with the convoy ships which were then guiding the merchant and fishing vessels out from England. It was of the utmost importance to warn Governor Graves of what awaited him at St. John and to prevent his sailing into a

Trap.

The records show that the “William” failed to meet up with the Governor and the convoy, so it continued on to Halifax to warn Lord Colville. The “Bonetta” had better luck. They were just about to give up all hope of ever seeing Governor Graves when the fog that had shut them up for three full days lifted and there, not more than a mile away, was the Governor’s ship. On hearing about the French invasion and being informed of Robert Carter's heroic defence of Ferryland, he immediately gave orders that a party of Marines be landed from his ship to help strengthen the defences on the Isle au Bois. On second thought, he put the Marines on board the "Bonetta" and she proceeded to Ferryland and landed the troops, while Governor Graves carried on to Placentia. After landing the Marines at Ferryland, the "Bonetta" went on to Halifax and Robert Carter sailed on her after giving instructions to the New Marine Commander to defend the settlement of Ferryland at all costs.

Robert Carter had a plan of campaign which he wanted to submit to Lord Colville who was in command of the Navy in North America. This scheme which Carter had worked out for the recapture of St. John's could be accomplished with a small force. He was anxious to have it put into force before the French could complete repairs to the fortifications and perhaps build new ones. Lord Colville was open to advice and he listened attentively to Robert Carter as he enthusiastically outlined his plan and offered to accompany the expedition and to furnish sufficient boats and other small crafts to convey the troops to the place thought best for landing with a view to making an overland march to capture St. John's. The Admiral was pleased with Carter’s plan and he immediately set about putting it into execution.

The commander of the troops, Colonel William Amherst, was in New York at the time, but Admiral Colville got in touch with him and summoned him to Louisburg, where his force of Swiss and German troops were billeted. There were additional troops in the area also, and they were called in to form a strong contingent. Without waiting for Colonel Amherst to arrive Lord Colville left for Newfoundland with Robert Carter accompanying him. On September 7th, somewhere off the settlement of Ferryland, Lord Colville’s squadron was met by Colonel Amherst and his troops. After consultation between Colonel Amherst, Colville and Robert Carter on the best strategy to employ during their campaign, it was decided to land Robert Carter at Ferryland and his instructions were to proceed immediately to mobilize his flotilla of boats and to gather all possible information from the men who had been sent into St. Johns to act as spies and ascertain, if possible, the strength the French forces available in the area, as well as finding out places around St. John's which were left unprotected, and if those places were suitable for the landing of troops, a place where a beachhead might be established for the landing of additional troops and supplies if that became necessary.

Robert Carter's original idea had been to land troops and supplies at Quidi Vidi through the Gut, but he learned from his spies that the French forces had foreseen the possibility of an attack through this area. Sometime during the summer they had blocked up the entrance to the Gut by loading up a number of old fishing boats with rocks and sinking them in and across the entrance so that it would be impossible for a ship to enter, even at high tide.

With this information in his possession, Robert Carter returned to Lord Colville and suggested an alternative. “Torbay," Carter said, "would be an [ideal](http://ide.il) place for the landing of troops and supplies." The Admiral agreed, and it was therefore to Torbay the fleet proceeded without any more delay. In boats supplied by the people of Ferryland, Colonel Amherst's troops were landed and supplies taken ashore. Robert Carter was there in the thick of it taking part in getting the troops ashore and then lining up with Colonel Amherst and the troops to make that seven mile march through the woods and swamps to St. John's, the objective they had been planning and working for. Their plan of operation worked out well for they broke out on the edge of Quidi Vidi Lake, and from there they crossed the head of the Lake and proceeded to get the troops up to the top of Signal Hill. In the battle which followed — what might be described as the BATTLE OF SIGNAL HILL — the French were badly defeated. The plan of attack, coming from the north instead of the south as the French thought, the French forces were caught off guard and the Town of St. John's was once more back in British hands. It was the last time that the capital of Newfoundland was occupied by an enemy force.

Robert Carter was a great strategist and his plan of attack on the French succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Admiral Colville and Colonel Amherst made a long report to the King about Carter's great service and his outstanding patriotism. The King and the Government of England wrote Mr. Carter and thanked him for his great service to the troops who, largely through his direction, were successful in achieving their objective. Up until his death in the year 1800, Robert Carter was amongst the most highly respected and admired of men in the Island of Newfoundland. His son, William Carter, became a Judge and held that office for nearly half a century. His grandson, Peter Weston Carter, was also a Judge for nearly sixty years. His great-grandson, Sir Frederick B.T. Carter, was Prime Minister [of Newfoundland and was after](http://ofNewfoundland.andwa.af-)wards appointed Chief Justice of the

Supreme Court of Newfoundland. Robert Carter deserves to hold an honoured place in Newfoundland history.

1. Editor’s Note: P. J. Wakeham was the publisher and principal author of New-Land Magazine. He used it as a vehicle for publishing his imaginative articles, frequently under his pseudonym of “Jarge”. As can be seen from this article, however, even though it purports to be historically accurate, it too is an imaginative re-writing of the historical events of the day, giving much greater credit to Robert Carter for these events than any contemporary reports or subsequent learned studies have ever suggested. The reader is cautioned to treat the above story accordingly and not to assume that it is entirely factual. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)