

Shawnadithit: Last of the Beothuk

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Shawnadithit grew anxious waiting for her uncle, Longnon, to return to camp at the junction of Badger Brook and the Exploits River, deep in the wilds of Newfoundland. The little band of Beothuk was starving and Longnon had set out with his daughter in desperation to collect shellfish at Badger Bay. Some days later, Shawnadithit left camp with her mother and sister to search for them. They found them dead at Badger Bay, shot by the local fishermen.

In spring 1823 Shawnadithit, her sister and mother were taken captive by the furrier William Cull. The authorities decided to return them to their people as emissaries of peace, loaded them with presents, and left them at the mouth of Charles Brook with a small boat.

All three women were sick with the consumption that was a plague among the Beothuk. Shawnadithit's sister died and soon it was obvious that her mother was dying too. Shawnadithit took her mother to a sandy point by the waters of Red Indian Lake, held her in her arms and sang her people's last lament. She sewed her body into a blanket of birch bark, buried her and set out alone for the coast, stumbling out at Notre Dame Bay. She knew now that she was the last of her people.

The Beothuk were a semi-nomadic people who wintered around the shores of the beautiful lakes of the interior of Newfoundland, where they hunted caribou and other game. In the spring they would paddle off downriver to the coast to hunt seal and salmon, fashioning most of what they needed along the way. They built unique conical birch houses called mamateeks which featured double layers of birch and moss insulation.

In 1500 the Portuguese explorer Gaspar Corte-Real had the first encounter with the Beothuk, capturing 57 of them to sell as slaves. The Beothuks' habit of covering themselves with red ochre gained them the name "Red Indians," which was later applied to all the tribes of North America.

In other parts of Atlantic Canada, the French and English needed First Nations partners in order to carry on the fur trade. In Newfoundland the Europeans were there to fish, which put them into direct conflict with the Beothuk. Oblivious to the need for the salmon to spawn upriver, the fishermen erected weirs across the mouths of the rivers. Beothuk caught raiding the weirs were killed.

Cut off from the coast and from the salmon, forced to hide in the interior where white trappers exterminated the beaver, marten and sable, and decimated by disease, the Beothuk population dwindled to a mere few hundred by the mid 18th century.

In 1792 Magistrate John Bland carried out an investigation of several killings around Twillingate, where it was reported that Beothuk were "shot down like deer. Bland predicted accurately that the English, like the Spanish before them, "will have affixed to their character the indelible reproach of having extirpated a whole race of people."

Shawnadithit was a witness to the final encounters between her dwindling people and the expeditions sent out to capture Beothuks alive. She saw the capture of Demasduit and the brave attempt of her

husband Nonosbawsut to rescue her in March 1819. Enraged at his wife's kidnap, Nonosbawsut charged at the intruders until they killed him.

Shawnadithit lived for a while in obscurity as a domestic at Exploits. Though she was clearly intelligent, there was no attempt to encourage her to speak of her experiences. In St John's there was a growing concern that all knowledge of the Beothuk would be lost. William Epps Cormack, the peripatetic explorer and humanitarian, brought Shawnadithit to St. John's under the auspices of the Boethick Institution. She learned English and showed a gift for drawing. Her maps, drawings and stories are the last records of the language and customs of her doomed people.

When Cormack left Newfoundland, Shawnadithit responded to his kindness by giving him a lock of her hair and two stones from Red Indian Lake, tiny symbols of all that remained of the great territory in which the Beothuk once prospered. She died shortly after, on June 6, 1829, of tuberculosis, "the cough demon" that had victimized so many of her people.

The story of the Beothuk is surely one of the saddest chapters in Canadian history, made personal and melancholy by the story of Shawnadithit herself. As Cormack wrote, "the British have trespassed in this country and have become a blight and a scourge to a portion of the human race; under their power a defenceless and once independent proud tribe of men have been extirpated from the face of the earth.

Disappearance of the Beothuk

In April 1823, a group of Newfoundland fur trappers encountered three Beothuk women at Badger Bay – a mother, Doodebewshet, and her two daughters, Easter Eve (her Beothuk name is unknown) and Shanawdithit. The women were in a starving condition and had journeyed from the island's interior in search of mussels. Although Shanawdithit seemed otherwise in good health, her mother and sister were sick with tuberculosis and died shortly after the men brought them to Exploits Island. Shanawdithit estimated that no more than 15 people were left in her tribe.

She spent the next five years at Exploits Island, working as a servant in the household of the magistrate and merchant John Peyton Jr. In 1828, the Boethick Institution moved her to St. John's, where she lived for a year under the care of the philanthropist and scientist William Epps Cormack. Shanawdithit provided Cormack with important information about the Beothuk culture and history. She translated English words into her own language, drew pictures of Beothuk tools, food, mythological figures, homes, and other artifacts, and illustrated various encounters between her people and European settlers.

On 6 June 1829, Shanawdithit died of tuberculosis. She was about 29 years old. Although her death is widely accepted as marking the end of the Beothuk people as a distinct cultural entity, oral evidence indicates that some survivors were still living on the island, in Labrador, and elsewhere in North America. Some may have joined neighbouring native groups, such as the Innu and Mi'kmaq. In 1910, the American anthropologist Frank Speck spoke with a woman who self-identified as Beothuk. Santu Toney said that her father was Beothuk and her mother Mi'kmaq. Both of her parents had died in the 1800s. Toney also said that she had known other Beothuk-Mi'kmaq couples, but did not cite any specific examples. She was living in Massachusetts at the time.

A variety of factors contributed to the disappearance of the Beothuk. The arrival of European settlers dramatically reduced the amount of available land and resources, while an almost complete lack of trade and other interactions between the two peoples precluded any beneficial relationships. At the same time, exposure to European diseases, particularly tuberculosis, took a toll on the Beothuk population. Sick, starving, and largely isolated from outside help, the Beothuk dwindled in numbers throughout the 18th and 19th centuries and eventually disappeared.

Reduced Access to Land and Resources

Avoidance was one strategy the Beothuk used to deal with the Europeans' arrival – they withdrew from areas where the newcomers settled to live elsewhere on the island. By the late 17th century, English and French settlers and seasonal fishing crews had claimed many of the island's coastal areas, particularly in Trinity and Placentia Bays. While this left much of Newfoundland's interior and some of its more sheltered inlets available to the Beothuk, it also cut them off from valuable salmon, seal, and other coastal resources that previously made up an important part of their diet and lifestyle.

Beothuk access to resources continued to shrink throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as European settlement expanded northward and westward. Salmon-rich Notre Dame Bay initially provided a safe retreat for the Beothuk until settlers opened salmon-catching stations there in the early 18th century. The Beothuk retaliated by stealing nets and attacking some settlers, but the fishing stations remained in place and the Beothuk eventually retreated to the Exploits River in the island's interior.

The Beothuk scavenged abandoned fishing stations for nails, kettles, fish hooks, and other metal pieces. They converted some of these items into arrowheads for harpoons, spears, and other weapons.

Here, however, the Beothuk had to survive on limited food resources. Freshwater fish were scarce and moose were not yet present on the island. Caribou made up the bulk of their diet. The Beothuk periodically travelled to the coast in search of food, but had to compete with a growing settler population. The few Europeans who encountered Beothuk in the 1800s often reported that they were starving. Malnourishment would have made it even more difficult for weakened hunters to catch food for their families.

The Beothuk took steps to resist and adapt to European encroachment. In addition to moving inland, they adjusted many of their hunting, subsistence, and other practices to better suit life on the interior. These efforts may have included improving food-preservation technologies to allow caribou and other meat to last throughout the year, and altering hunting methods to better harvest interior species. They also retaliated against the encroachments by stealing fishing nets, destroying river dams, boats, and other property, and by sometimes attacking their European competitors.

Limited Interaction with Europeans

Limited interaction with Europeans also contributed to the Beothuk's demise. Newfoundland's seasonal fishery and small settler population meant it could not support a missionary effort until the 1800s. At the same time, European interest in Newfoundland was mostly confined to its marine resources, so neither the British nor French governments appointed agents to establish relations with the Beothuk.

With no fur traders, missionaries, or government agents to facilitate contact and promote peaceful relations, and with the Beothuk strategy of avoidance, the two groups remained largely isolated from

one another. Thus, the Beothuk were cut off from any help that may have come from potentially friendly groups among the outsiders. In 1822, William Cormack had hoped to make contact with the Beothuk during his 30-day trek across the island's interior, but failed to meet anyone. He subsequently founded the Beothick Institution in 1827, which sent out other expeditions that also failed to find any Beothuk. It was by then widely feared that they would soon be extinct as a people.

Disease

European diseases also became a problem for the Beothuk, particularly after permanent settlement of the island increased in the 18th century. While some Beothuk may have contracted the measles or smallpox, tuberculosis was likely the most devastating of the European diseases.

Although it is unknown exactly how many Beothuk died from tuberculosis, evidence from Shanawdithit's conversation and other sources suggests their population sharply declined during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, from approximately 350 in 1768 to 72 in 1811 (Marshall, 1981). Tension between European settlers and the Beothuk sometimes escalated into violence and there were deaths on both sides, but this cannot account for such a sudden and dramatic population decline.

A group of fur trappers captured Demasduit, who was Shanawdithit's aunt, on 5 March 1819 near the Exploits River. She lived in white society for less than a year before dying of tuberculosis on 8 January 1820.

Watercolour by Lady Henrietta Martha Hamilton. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada ([C-087698](#)), Ottawa, Ontario.

If, however, Europeans transmitted tuberculosis to Beothuk living in increasingly confined areas, the disease may have quickly spread among a population vulnerable to unfamiliar viruses and bacteria. As increasing numbers of Beothuk became ill, it would have further hampered their ability to hunt and gather food for survival.

Scholars estimate the Beothuk population was small before European contact – between 500 and 700 people – which would have made their survival as a people even more precarious in the face of European encroachment and disease.

Shawnadithit

Shawnadithit (also known as Nance or Nancy April), the last Beothuk (born circa 1800-6 in what is now NL; died 6 June 1829 in St. John's, NL). Shawnadithit's record of Beothuk culture continues to shape modern understandings of her people. In 2007, the federal government announced the unveiling of a Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (*See Historic Site*) plaque recognizing Shawnadithit's importance to Canadian history.

Historical Context: Disappearance of the Beothuk

Shawnadithit was Beothuk, an Indigenous people who once lived in what is now Newfoundland. With the establishment of more permanent European settlement on their territory in the 18th century, the Beothuk increasingly found themselves forced onto smaller areas of land, where their access to food

and traditional resources was reduced. Tuberculosis, and other diseases brought by the Europeans to North America, significantly reduced the Beothuk population. So too did conflict. In one noted instance in March 1819, Shawnadithit observed European traders capture her aunt, Demasduwit (also spelled Demasduit), and murder her uncle, Beothuk chief Nonosbawsut (or Nonosabusut), at Red Indian Lake, in the western interior of Newfoundland. (*See also* Slavery of Indigenous Peoples in Canada.)

Sick and starved, the Beothuk died out in 1829 with the death of Shawnadithit. While some claim that the Beothuk escaped total extinction by marrying into other Indigenous nations, such as the Mi'kmaq, these theories do not negate the legacy of Shawnadithit as a record keeper of Beothuk history.

DID YOU KNOW?

In 1827, Scottish explorer and naturalist William E. Cormack took the skulls and other burial items of Demasduwit and Nonosbawsut, Shawnadithit's aunt and uncle, and sent them to his mentor Robert Jameson, a professor of natural history at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. The remains were eventually housed at the National Museum of Scotland. In 2015, Chief Mi'sel Joe of the Miawpukek First Nation at Conne River (Newfoundland and Labrador) began a major effort, eventually supported by the Canadian and Newfoundland and Labrador governments, to repatriate the remains of Demasduwit and her husband. In January 2019, National Museums Scotland reached an agreement with the federal government to arrange for the transfer of the remains back to Canada.

Shawnadithit and the Europeans

In April 1823, Shawnadithit, her mother and her sister, all starving, were captured by English furriers at Badger Bay and taken to St. John's by merchant and magistrate John Peyton Jr. There, the women were supposed to be placed under the care of Governor Charles Hamilton. However, he was in England at the time of their arrival and, because the women were in poor health, Captain David Buchan, who was acting on Hamilton's behalf, decided to release them, after first ensuring they received medical attention. Given gifts to present to their people — peace offerings — Peyton left them at Charles Brook, located on the western side of the Bay of Exploits and north of Exploits River. Shawnadithit and her family searched but could not locate any surviving Beothuk in the area. During this time, the health of Shawnadithit's mother and sister worsened. They soon died, likely the result of complications from tuberculosis. All alone, Shawnadithit was taken into the home of John Peyton Jr. at Exploits, where she worked as a household assistant for five years. It was there that English settlers renamed her Nance or Nancy April.

Recording Beothuk History

In 1828, Shawnadithit was brought to the Beothuk (then spelled "Boeothick") Institution in St. John's, an organization formed the year prior as a means of protecting what remained of Beothuk culture. Listening to Shawnadithit speak about her people, the institution's president, William Eppes Cormack, recorded valuable information about the language and customs of the Beothuk. (*See also* Indigenous Languages in Canada.) Shawnadithit also drew valuable sketches of Beothuk settlements, tools and people, as well as maps of territory. (*See also* Indigenous Territory.) Her record remains some of the only information about the Beothuk.

Death

Sick with tuberculosis, Shanawdithit died on 6 June 1829. She was buried in a cemetery in St. John's. Her skull was sent for scientific research to London, England, where it is believed to have been destroyed during the Second World War

Call for statue in St. John's to remember Shanawdithit, last of her people

Bryanna Brown gazed somberly at the rectangular plaque erected in memory of Shanawdithit, the last known Beothuk.

It's mounted on a rock in Bannerman Park in St. John's, near the Military Road entrance.

"I do not believe that plaque is enough for me," said Brown, 20.

The Inuk Memorial University business student is not alone in her call for a more visible monument to Shanawdithit in the capital city.

Christopher Sheppard, the president of the National Association of Friendship Centres and the executive director of the St. John's Native Friendship Centre, said a statue of Shanawdithit should be at the entrance to Confederation Building instead of the John Cabot statue that's there now.

Sheppard said he's not calling for Cabot's statue to be removed but for recognition of other aspects of the province's history, particularly what happened to the Beothuk.

"It may be nice to acknowledge that John Cabot sailed here in 1497, but that signalled the end of a group of people that we have to go to The Rooms to learn about," said Sheppard.

Do not observe Discovery Day holiday

John Cabot, or Giovanni Caboto, is credited with discovering the island of Newfoundland on June 24, 1497, and Discovery Day is a provincial government holiday in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The place where the explorer actually made landfall remains under debate; the list of possibilities includes both Newfoundland's Cape Bonavista and Cape Breton.

But if it was Newfoundland, Indigenous people lived here thousands of years before his arrival, and the Norse settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows dates to around the year 1000.

Neither Sheppard nor the staff at the St. John's Native Friendship Centre nor Brown observe Discovery Day.

On one end, it might be a day of discovery, and to celebrate, but for my people on the other end, it marks a lot of trauma, a lot of terrible things.- Bryanna Brown

Brown said she rejects the notion that Indigenous people in Newfoundland and Labrador were "discovered," and called the holiday upsetting.

"On one end, it might be a day of discovery, and to celebrate, but for my people on the other end, it marks a lot of trauma, a lot of terrible things," said Brown, one of nine Indigenous young people from across Canada who recently appeared before the Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples as part of the Youth Indigenize the Senate initiative.

'Contact was the beginning and we know what the end was'

Shanawdithit died June 6, 1829, more than 300 years after Cabot's arrival in North America.

"It didn't happen at the same time," said Sheppard. "You have 1497 and 1829. But it was the beginning. Contact was the beginning, and we know what the end was."

For the Beothuk, year-round European settlement in Newfoundland in the 17th century led to drastic change.

There was violence between the Europeans and the Beothuk. Reduced access to coastal areas, and the salmon and seal meat they provided, as well as exposure to European diseases took a heavy toll on the Beothuk in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Shanawdithit died from tuberculosis at the age of 28.

A small, easily overlooked plaque in front of the Riverhead Wastewater Treatment Facility on Southside Road in St. John's indicates its location is near the place where she was buried.

Statue of Portuguese explorer Corte-Real 'gigantic'

Brown contrasted it with the statue of Portuguese explorer Gaspar Corte-Real near Confederation Building in St. John's, donated in 1965 by the Portuguese Fisheries Organization in gratitude for the hospitality shown to the Portuguese fishermen who worked the Grand Banks.

"That statue is gigantic, you cannot miss it. Everyone drives past it and they see it. And to see that there is not a statue of Shanawdithit, to see that there is a statue of him still standing very tall, I think that is quite insulting," she said.

There is a life-sized statue of Shanawdithit in the forest surrounding the grounds of the Beothuk Interpretation Centre in Boyd's Cove. Gerald Squires created it and Lubin Boykov poured the bronze. The unveiling took place in the year 2000.

Call for recognition of Indigenous history and culture

But Sheppard wants a statue in St. John's as well, given that Shanawdithit died in the capital city, either somewhere close to Confederation Building or downtown.

The St. John's Native Friendship Centre holds an annual sunrise ceremony near the plaque to Shanawdithit in Bannerman Park on June 21. This year's remembrance will start at 6 a.m.

I want a day in this province to recognize the history of Indigenous people and the Indigenous people that exist here.- Christopher Sheppard

Sheppard said that as an Indigenous person in the province, he finds the lack of related images and memorials challenging, pointing out that there are even statues of a Newfoundland dog and a Labrador retriever in St. John's.

"I want a day in this province to recognize the history of Indigenous people and the Indigenous people that exist here," said Sheppard.

Brown said she would like to see people across Newfoundland and Labrador celebrate National Indigenous Peoples Day on June 21.

Premier Dwight Ball, the minister responsible for Indigenous Affairs, said Discovery Day will go ahead as planned this year but added he's willing to consider the issue.

"It just goes to show, once again, how things evolve over time," said Ball.

The provincial Liberal party passed a resolution at its annual general meeting this past weekend calling for the province's coat of arms to be updated.

At the meeting, Torngat Mountains MHA Randy Edmunds referred to the representation of what he called "noble savages" on the coat of arms. As an aboriginal person, Edmunds said, he believes the province has made progress since the coat of arms, with its shield flanked by a pair of Beothuk men, was drawn up in the 1600s.

Afterward, Ball told reporters change is coming.

"I can guarantee you that is something we'll be looking at — and modernizing — what those symbols should appropriately reflect," Ball said.

It's difficult to find an official image of the coat of arms on the government's website.

A page within the Communications and Public Engagement section says the coat of arms is not a good marketing tool and "does not represent all the incredible qualities of our province and our people."

[National Indigenous Peoples Day events](#) in St. John's are open to the public, including celebrations starting at 4:30 p.m. on June 21 at the Techniplex on Churchill Ave.

SOURCE #1:

Title: Shawnadithit: Last of the Beothuk

Date of Publication: June 17, 2013

Author: James H. Marsh

Website: The Canadian Encyclopedia

URL: <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/shawnadithit-last-of-the-beothuk-feature>

SOURCE #2:

Title: Disappearance of the Beothuk

Date of Publication: July 2013

Author: NA

Website: Heritage Newfoundland & Labrador

URL: <https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/aboriginal/beothuk-disappearance.php>

SOURCE #3:

Title: Shawnadithit

Date of Publication: February 7, 2006

Author: George M. Story

Website: The Canadian Encyclopedia

URL: <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/shawnadithit>

SOURCE 4:

Title: Call for statue in St. John's to remember Shanawdithit, last of her people

Date of Publication: June 19, 2018

Author: Ramona Dearing

Website: CBC

URL:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/shanawdithit-beothuk-statue-1.4710707>