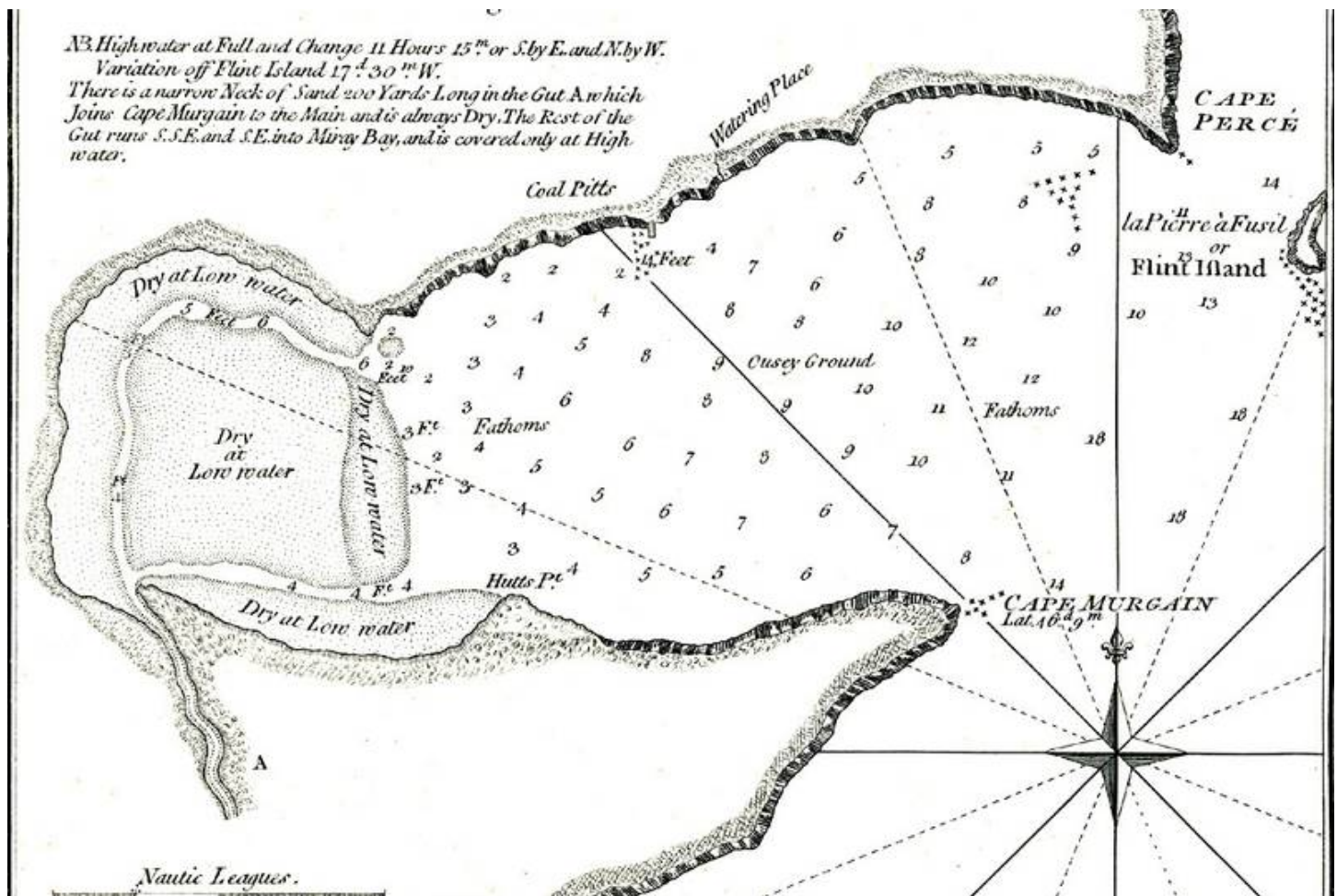


KEN MACDONALD: 'Cow Bay' remains a mystery

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Ken MacDonald

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The renowned British explorer James Cook surveyed the coastal waters of Cape Breton in 1760. This is his map what is now Port Morien. Note the two channels in the sandbar. - Contributed

Missing cow's story provides genealogical clue

The Morien Connection

For many of us who have the good fortune of growing up in Cape Breton, we are never really far away from family.

In Port Morien, an old story about the village illustrates that point. It tells of a wandering cow and its owner desperate to find it. Through its narrative, it coincidentally leaves a valuable genealogical clue.

Before its name was changed by provincial statute in 1895, Port Morien was known as Cow Bay. There has been a great deal of speculation as to the origins of the name. There seems to be an explanation in a speech delivered by Henry Meloney to the Mechanics Institute in Sydney in 1868. He tells of the plight of John Meloney, one of Sydney's earliest citizens.

Somewhere around 1785, Meloney noticed that the cow he had recently bought in Louisbourg was missing from his property in Cape Breton's colonial capital of Sydney. He suspected the cow had wandered back in the direction of Louisbourg, so he set out to find his prized possession.

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Land transportation at the time was very difficult — there were few roadways, sometimes only paths in the woods.



A banner from a 1957 Cape Breton Post article about the history of Port Morien highlights the village's former name. CONTRIBUTED

He arrived at Mira Ferry (now Albert Bridge), and met a gentleman named Louis King. He was French, and King was the anglicized version of his French name Louis LeRoy. He owned much of the land close to where Albert Bridge stands today. He told Meloney he didn't see the cow, but if it did come his way, it could not cross the Mira and would have to follow the river down to Mira Gut to the ocean.

The long journey eventually took them there, and following the ocean shore, they arrived in old Cow Bay. There they met the only resident of the area, John Leango (also spelled Leangot). To Meloney's delight, Leango had found the cow. For their return trip, he advised Meloney to follow the shoreline to Lingan, as surveyors had blazed a trail from there to Sydney. Six weeks after he set out, Meloney arrived back in Sydney with his precious cow.

Through the course of his 1868 speech, Meloney drops some valuable genealogical gems — we find that John Leango was the son-in-law of Louis (LeRoy) King and that LeRoy had left Louisbourg after the 1758 siege. We know through land and marriage records that John Leango and Louis LeRoy's daughter, whose name we never knew, had at least two daughters — Mary Ann and Margaret. Mary Ann married Benjamin Wadden and Margaret married Patrick Phalen, both soldiers in the Nova Scotia Regiment of the British Army stationed in Sydney. The two couples would both settle in the Cow Bay area and have large families.

Records indicate that Benjamin and Mary Ann Wadden had 10 children. Some eventually married members of the Boutilier, Peach and Currie families. The sons and daughters of Patrick and Margaret Phalen would eventually marry members of the Currie, Munro, McDonald and Bray families. My grandmother, whose maiden name was Bertha Phalen, was their great-granddaughter.

So what does all of this mean?

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John Leango and his wife, the daughter of Louis LeRoy, have thousands of descendants who live in many parts of the world. They can all be traced back to the French at the Fortress Louisbourg.

Over 220 years, their descendents married members of many long-established Port Morien families such as the Spencers, Giovannettis, Murrants, Clements, MacIntoshes, Shepards and several more. Many of the Leango descendants live in Port Morien and the surrounding area today. Residents like me and numerous others have many distant relatives living in our midst.

And what of the name "Cow Bay?"

It looks like John Meloney and his cow had nothing to do with the name. The explorer James Cook produced a map in 1860 that names the area "Cow Bay." That predates the visit by John Meloney and the cow by about 25 years. The origin of the name remains a mystery.

And, as we have seen, in Cape Breton you are indeed never really far from family.

Ken MacDonald is a retired school teacher and administrator, and a community volunteer. His family can be traced back seven generations in Port Morien, where he has lived almost all his life. He can be reached at morienbay@gmail.com.

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