

Fash|on|ng Acad|ans

Clothing in the Atlantic World, 1650–1750

HILARY DODA



Fashioning Acadians



McGill-Queen's Studies in Early Canada / Avant le Canada

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For Richard, who has always believed in me.

Contents

Tables and Figures ix

Acknowledgments xv

Introduction 3

1 • The Acadian World 11

2 • The Sewing Box 54

3 • Fibres and Fabrics 101

4 • Dress Accessories 134

5 • Garments 181

6 • Assembling the Puzzle 216

Notes 231

Bibliography 261

Index 285

Tables and Figures

Tables

1.1	Wool yardage needs in Acadian settlements	35
1.2	Beads found at three Acadian sites	48
2.1	Scissors found at four Acadian sites	58
2.2	Pin types found at Beaubassin	80
2.3	Pin head types found at Beaubassin	80
2.4	Other sewing tools in Acadia	82
3.1	Textile seals found at Acadian sites	112
3.2	Imported linen for sale in Acadia	114
3.3	Imported wool for sale in Acadia	118
3.4	Imported cottons for sale in Acadia	122
3.5	Imported silk for sale in Acadia	125
4.1	Button types found at four Acadian sites	137
4.2	Beaubassin button breakdowns	141
4.3	Melanson button breakdowns	145
4.4	Belleisle button breakdowns	146
4.5	Louisbourg button breakdowns	148
4.6	Beaubassin buckle breakdowns	156
4.7	Belleisle buckle breakdowns	158
4.8	Melanson buckle breakdowns	160
4.9	Jewellery in Acadia	177
5.1	Louisbourg underpinnings	190
5.2	Ensembles in Louisbourg	194
5.3	Textile use, main garments	195
5.4	Outerwear and accessories in Louisbourg	202

Figures

- 1.1 Map of selected Acadian settlements and major locations. Hilary Doda, 2019. 14
- 1.2 Plan de la banlieu du Fort Royal a l'Acadie et environes et de ses environs, 1708; Nova Scotia Archives, Map Collection: Annapolis, Nova Scotia. 21
- 1.3 Detail, *Carte de l'Acadie, isle Royale et pais voisins. Pour servir à l'histoire generale des voyages. Par M.B. Ingr. de la Marine. 1757.* Library and Archives Canada/Maps, plans and charts/n0000116. 25
- 1.4 *Plan de la ville de Louisbourg en l'Isle Royale.* 1745. Collection géographique du marquis de Paulmy; 329. Paulmy, Antoine-René de Voyer d'Argenson marquis de. Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Arsenal, MS-6432 (20). 29
- 1.5 Trade silver buckle, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Object #7B17E5.I2 / 2012. 46
- 1.6 Glass beads, Melanson, associated with Anne Bourg. Image by Richard Morris, from photograph by Hilary Doda / Object #17B2E4.I / 2022. String added based on original description, for illustrative purposes. 47
- 1.7 Pipe stem fragments, possibly beads. Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Vanessa Smith / Objects #7B16V2.3, 7B17C10.3, 7B17E3.39, 7B17H14.I6 / 2015. 49
- 2.1 Scissors case, French, 17th century. Believed to be a wedding gift. Steel. Met Museum, Gift of Joseph G. Reinis, 2014. Accession Number: 2014.737.3. 57
- 2.2 Plated scissors and snips found at Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Objects #7B7D8.I0 (bottom), 7B7D8.I1 (top) / 2022. 60
- 2.3 Snips, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Object #7B16F6.07 / 2015. 61
- 2.4 Iron snips handle found in association with the awl, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Vanessa Smith / Object #7B12V4.02 / 2015. 61
- 2.5 Detail, *Peddler of Knives, Scissors and Combs*, Anne Claude Philippe de Tubières, comte de Caylus, 1742. Met Museum, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1953. Acc. num 53.600.588(39). 62
- 2.6 Plated scissors, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Object #7B16F6.08 / 2022. 63
- 2.7 Scissors. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Hilary Doda, extrapolation by Richard Morris / Object #2L81D4-79, Louisbourg lot 2E / 2019. 64

- 2.8 Scissor handles, Louisbourg. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Hilary Doda / Object #2L80T11-77 / 2019 (left) and #2I37-2L29P24-4 / 2019 (right). 65
- 2.9 Plain snips / scissors, Louisbourg. Iron with copper alloy rivet. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Hilary Doda / Object #2L8IK9.55 / 2019. 66
- 2.10 Detail, *Portrait of a Woman*, Joseph Wright, ca 1770. Gift of Heathcote Art Foundation, 1986. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1986.264.6. 67
- 2.11 Scissors, Belleisle. Photo: Hilary Doda, with thanks to Marc Lavoie. Object #BeDi-2:2A7-6096 / 2017. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. 68
- 2.12 Blades from domestic scissors, Belleisle. Photo: Hilary Doda, with thanks to Marc Lavoie. Object #BeDi-2:6833 (2004; 1C7) / 2017. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. 69
- 2.13 Snips, Belleisle. Objects #BeDi-2:1955 (snips) and BeDi-2:526 (handle), found together in the Blanchard house, unit A, level I. Photo: Tim Chisholm, 2022. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. 70
- 2.14 Detail, “Tailor of suits and tailor of bodices.” *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert*. Courtesy of the ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, University of Chicago. 71
- 2.15 Snips handles, Blanchard house, Belleisle. Objects #BeDi-2:5313 and BeDi-2:2274. Photo: Tim Chisholm, 2022. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. 72
- 2.16 Blade tips of small sewing or domestic scissors and partial haft and loop of snips, Melanson. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Objects #17B2C9.12 (top) and 17B2C11.1 (bottom) / 2022. 74
- 2.17 Short white pins from Beaubassin, Type C compressed wound-wire head and mostly intact tin plating. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Vanessa Smith / Objects #7B17HI6.3, 7B17E3.12, 7B17P4.02 / 2016. 79
- 2.18 Brass tailor’s thimble (left) and copper thimble fragment (right), Beaubassin. Photos: ©Parks Canada / Objects #7B17H22.02 (left) and 7B17E2.4 (right) / 2012. 85
- 2.19 Needle case, Louisbourg. Likely belonged to Anne Levron, Marianne Benoist, or Anne Jacau. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Hilary Doda / Object #2L6IC3-5 / 2019. 87
- 2.20 Wooden and iron awl, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Object #7B12V4.4 / 2022. 88
- 2.21 Iron rings from Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Objects #7B17H23.04 (top) and 7B17R2.20 (bottom) / 2022. 89

- 2.22 Detail of woman's embroidered jacket with lacing rings, ca 1780. *The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Museum Purchase*. Acc. Num: 2000-86. 89
- 2.23 Bone bodkin, Melanson. Image by Richard Morris, from photos by Hilary Doda. Object #17B2E3.4 / 2019. 90
- 2.24 Spindle whorl, Belleisle. Clay, likely local. Object #BeDi-2:4316. Photo: Tim Chisholm, 2022. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. 93
- 2.25 Standing Woman Holding a Spindle, and Head of a Woman in Profile to Right. Antoine Watteau, ca 1714–18. Met Museum, Bequeathed by Anne D. Thomson, 1923. Accession #23.280.5. 94
- 2.26 Detail, *Peasant Interior*, the Le Nain Brothers, 1642. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington. 94
- 2.27 Distaff for linen, eighteenth century Acadian. Fort Beauséjour. Image by Richard Morris, with thanks to Parks Canada. Object #E.36.11.1 / 2019. 95
- 3.1 Textile seals, Blanchard house, Belleisle. Objects #BeDi-2:2773 (left) and BeDi-2:2775 (right). Photos: Tim Chisholm, 2022. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. 110
- 3.2 Textile seal with the mark of the town of Mazamet, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Object #7B16F2.05 / 2022. 111
- 3.3 *Femme de qualité en déshabillé d'étoffe siamoise*, French, 1687. J.D. de Saint-Jean, *Recueil des modes de la cour de France*. Photograph © 2022, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Elizabeth Day McCormick Collection, Accession #44.1157. 120
- 3.4 Fashion illustration for the winter of 1677–78. Issued with the “*Mercure Galant*” Extraordinaire (supplementary) of January 1678. ark:/12148/btv1b84053813. Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. 127
- 3.5 Detail, Fashion plate from the *Mercure de France*, 1729, with muffs on both the lady and the gentleman. ark:/12148/bpt6k63534382. Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France. 128
- 4.1 *Portrait of Two Boys*, probably Joseph and John Joseph Nollekens, ca 1745. Joseph Francis Nollekens. Oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1976.7.61. 136
- 4.2 Clay button mould for pewter buttons, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Vanessa Smith / Object #7B1C6 / 2016. 138
- 4.3 The Button-maker, Diderot, plate 3. 1771. Courtesy of the ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, University of Chicago. 138
- 4.4 Detail, embroidered linen waistcoat with dorset buttons, British, 1740s. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, #T.227-1923. 139

- 4.5 Coiled iron wire finding, from Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Object #7BI7CI5.37 / 2022. 142
- 4.6 Man's conical silver toggle button, Malta, 1775–1798. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London, # 1467A-1873. 142
- 4.7 Bone button and bovine scapula, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Vanessa Smith / Object #7BI7R2.5 / 2016. 143
- 4.8 Buttons, Belleisle. Images by Richard Morris. Objects #BeDi-2:1445, BeDi-2:3417, BeDi-2:4018 / 2019. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. 146
- 4.9 Sleeve button, green paste jewel in plated setting, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Object #7BI7N2.01 / 2022. 149
- 4.10 Detail, *Love in a Village*, Isaac Bickerton, 1767, Oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1985.19.6. 149
- 4.11 Hand-etched button, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Vanessa Smith / Object #7BI2K9.1 / 2015. 150
- 4.12 Copper alloy sleeve buttons with fleur de lys details, Melanson. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Object #17B7C4.1 / 2022. 151
- 4.13 Adult man's shoe, Grand Pré, dated ca 1720–30. Image by Richard Morris, from photograph by Hilary Doda / Object #8B27A20.1 / 2022. 152
- 4.14 Copper alloy shoe buckles, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Objects (left to right) #7BI6S2.2, 7BI6D2.02, 7B7A8.01, 7BI7E3.22 / 2022. 157
- 4.15 Buckles, Belleisle. Objects (left to right) #BeDi-2:1959, BeDi-2:2727, BeDi-2:245. Photo: Tim Chisholm, 2022. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. 158
- 4.16 Brass buckle, Melanson. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Object #17B7L3.1 / 2022. 161
- 4.17 Possible tinkler cones, Beaubassin. Image by Richard Morris, from photograph by Hilary Doda. Objects #7BI7E2.18 and 7BI7E2.3 / 2019. 164
- 4.18 Crucifix, Belleisle. Object #BeDi-2:1755. Photo: Tim Chisholm, 2022. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. 169
- 4.19 Chaplet. Image by Richard Morris, from photographs courtesy of Fortress Louisbourg. Object # 4L56L9-2 / 2019. 171
- 4.20 Glass dove bead, Belleisle. Object #BeDi-2:2172. Photo: Tim Chisholm, 2022. Courtesy of the Nova Scotia Museum. 172
- 4.21 Possible rosary beads, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Hilary Doda / Objects (left to right) #7BI7E2.7, 7BI7E2.9, 7BI7H23.07, 7BI7CI5.14, 7BI7H23.01 / 2019. 173

- 4.22 *The Fidel Jewel*, Beaubassin. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Vanessa Smith / Object #7B22NI.1 / 2015. 174
- 4.23 Heart-shaped badge, Melanson. Image by Richard Morris, from photos by Stephane Noël. Object #17BI8DI / 2021. 178
- 5.1 Jacques Callot, *Three Women, One Holding a Child*, 1634. National Gallery of Art (US), Washington, DC. R.L. 1969.15.812, Baumfeld Collection. 185
- 5.2 French women in a less-structured jacket (E) and *corps à baleine* (A & B). From Garsault, *Art du tailleur*, 1769. Bibliothèque nationale de France. ark:/12148/bpt6k1067622n. 189
- 5.3 Figured silk jumps with side lacing, possibly for maternity wear. French, ca 1730–80. Photo: Michael Fredericks, USA. © Cora Ginsburg LLC. Currently held at the Art Institute of Chicago, Barbara E. and Richard J. Franke Fund. Accession #2011.667. 191
- 5.4 Parisian textile merchants and their clients. All wear ruffled *manchettes* (cuffs) at the elbow, and the shopgirls wear bibbed aprons and short-sleeved casaquins. From Garsault, *L'art de la lingere*, 1771. Bibliothèque nationale de France. 196
- 5.5 French man in a 1760s justaucorps (A), a waistcoat (B), and fall-front breeches (F). Garsault, *Art du tailleur*, 1769. Bibliothèque nationale de France. 199
- 5.6 Newfoundland fishermen, detail from *This map of North America, according to ye newest and most exact observations*. Moll, Herman, -1732, Bernard Lens, George Vertue, and John Bowles. [London Printed for I. Bowles; sold by H. Moll ?, 1715] Map. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division. 204
- 5.7 Detail from Diderot, vol. 4, Third section: Foundries. Plate III: Forges, Third Section, Clay Mold. Courtesy of the ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, University of Chicago. 204
- 5.8 Textile seal, single disc, obverse (left) and reverse (right), Beaubassin. The text around the obverse side appears to read PIE----- ANH OR ANK. Photo: ©Parks Canada / Tim Chisholm / Object #7BI7R2.12 / 2022. 207
- 5.9 Lappets up: *Oyster Seller*. Anne Claude Philippe de Tubières, comte de Caylus, 1738. Met Museum, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1953. Acc. num 53.600.588(32). 211
- 5.10 Lappets down. *Mrs Faber*. John Faber Jr, after Thomas Hudson, mid-18th century. Purchased with help from the Friends of the National Libraries and the Pilgrim Trust, 1966. National Portrait Gallery, UK. Reference Collection. NPG DI897. 211

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Fashioning Acadians



Introduction

They had no dye but black and green, but in order to obtain scarlet – of which they were remarkably fond – they procured the English scarlet duffil which they cut, teized, carded, spun, and wove in stripes to decorate the womens' garments.¹

SETTING SAIL in the first half of the seventeenth century, responding to a call from a patron who promised farmland, comfort, and support, a group of French settlers arrived on the eastern shores of Canada. The land was not empty, of course, having already been occupied for close to thirteen thousand years by the People of the Dawn.² Carving living space and resources for themselves from Mi'kmaw land, over the next hundred years, the people who would become known as the Acadians expanded through what is now Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. Land ownership continued to be contested, theoretical title to Acadia passing back and forth between French and English imperial authorities with varying degrees of enforcement until the mid-eighteenth century. And in an act of terror that began in 1755 and continued for the next eight years, the majority of the French-speaking, Catholic, Acadian population were forced into ships and sent into exile. Some of the Acadian survivors returned to Nova Scotia, though not to their original lands, while many others remained in the diaspora.

That is the summation of a well-known history, and the cultural mythology that surrounds the Acadians has grown in waves since then. The pastoral romanticism in some early writings about the colony set the tone for the development of an archetype of Acadians as distinct from other settler groups, an image which culminated in folkloric shorthand that mythologized the people as well as the land: rustic, unambitious peasants treading out their daily routines in Longfellow's forest primeval. This perception began early in Acadian tenure, in the simple poetry of Sieur de Dièreville's

1710 travelogue, and Abbé Raynal's subsequent publication on Acadia and its environs. Descriptions of Acadians as plain dressers with limited resources can be found in documents dating as far back as the seventeenth century. The speakers overwhelmingly describe a people living in relative isolation, working the land in their simple homespun clothes. The national mythologies that have grown out of those images are something of a mixed blessing. The enduring positive imagery of the so-called Acadian Golden Age became a rallying point for a community rebirth, a focal point for pride and connection, but the simplification allows us to overlook some of the complexities of Acadian life in the hundred years leading up to the Expulsion.

Over the years prior to the deportation, governors, officials, and clergy variously described Acadians as self-sufficient, proud, slovenly, devout, argumentative, lazy, indolent, and industrious. Many of those wonderfully contradictory descriptions do not fit with the growing body of archaeological and manuscript evidence of daily life in Acadian settlements.³ Given the limited documentation available, and almost none of it from the Acadians' own writings, we need other ways to evaluate the truth behind these stereotypes. One of the ways we can catch a glimpse of daily life is through wardrobe and the culture of Acadian dress. Buckles and beads, scissors, and lead seals survived the centuries under the earth, and through these artifacts we can trace the shapes of the garments that once bore them up. These ghosts still exist, figures that we can rebuild through examination of context, tools, decorations, and patterns of trade.

This material culture study takes a new look at the question of Acadian exceptionalism through the lens of clothing and textiles. In other words, what can Acadian clothing choices tell us about the nature of their society, and how can dress and fashion help to explain the mixed and often negative reactions of colonial authorities? We can answer those questions through an exploration of Acadian textile culture and the symbolic significance of the Acadians' embodied practices. Human beings gain understanding of the world by manipulating the material things around them, and clothing can be a powerful tool for idiomatic communication. The early modern period in the West saw more rapid changes in clothing and clothing culture than ever before, and the ways in which people adjusted their wardrobes to their circumstances give us insight into their perceptions of their outer world and their inner selves.

The history of textiles and dress in the region shows us the growth of a novel Acadian material identity as Acadian dress and adornment changed from something French to a distinctly local vernacular. Acadians were not a monolith, and the environments and communities in which groups found themselves played a large role in how their

sartorial selves were expressed. A new and distinctive style of dress was developing in Acadia prior to the deportation, a style much more nuanced and influenced by contemporary New England and French fashions than previously believed. This was partially tied to trade patterns, geography, and potentially due to some deliberate code-switching for outside observers, as seen in other colonial communities. Changing priorities and engagement with styles and practices of other groups, including the Mi'kmaq, and European authorities at the nearby forts, led to changes in Acadian self-presentation and group identity – shifts that indicate the growth of unique and localized dress cultures influenced by their physical and social environments. These changes confused outside observers and may have contributed in part to this mixed descriptive bag, a misunderstanding of symbols and visual cues that carried different resonance internally and externally. Those misunderstandings, in turn, contributed to growing imperial unease around Acadian allegiances and political intentions.

Interest in dress study as part of material culture has grown over the past fifty years and the developing field has engaged with a number of theoretical takes, including symbolic interactionism; semiotics, or the reading of symbols embedded in objects; and class- or gender-based analyses of consumption.⁴ Each of these frameworks draws new information out of clothing choice, which can then be incorporated into object-based analysis. The notion of embodied information and physical communication draws upon semiology, but also engages with historical projections of clothing as an extra layer or boundary to the body. Textiles are now understood to contain as much symbolic meaning and transformative power as any other ritual or utilitarian object, and dress becomes an individual communication within a broader culturally imposed “grammar,” a signifier of the training and socialization required for the creation of socially acceptable personal appearance.⁵ Choice of clothing both affects and is affected by the engagement that individuals and groups have with their political and domestic environments. Dick Hebdige’s theories discuss this relationship, framing dress choice as part of a continuing conversation about power and status, self-fashioning, and moral pressure.⁶ Extant articles of dress can bring us as close to the once-corporeal body as diary entries to the original mind of the author, and we can read them as a surviving shed skin that maintains the shape, habits, and priorities of the person who lived within.

In this book, I demonstrate the ways in which Acadian dress was changing and evolving over the course of their first settlement period in Nova Scotia. Engaging with current streams of thought in material culture and dress studies, this book also presents a methodology for determining the nature of clothing worn in a given area

when the articles themselves no longer exist for study. This methodology relies on artifacts discovered in both archaeological and historical contexts – found in the ground and passed down through the generations, respectively – as well as exploration of the various local environments and a complete review of available documentation. When wardrobes cannot be found, this data can be used systematically to determine the original shapes and styles of the clothing that was worn.

A useful scaffolding with which to support a study of this type is the framework of *material entanglement*, championed by historical archaeologist Ian Hodder.⁷ The metaphor of material entanglement as it is currently used in historical archaeology is an attempt to bridge the gap between object analysis and social theory. In brief, material entanglement theory holds that it is the connections between *things* – the humans, physical items, social structures, habits, beliefs, and relationships between all of the above – that define a culture and cultural moment.⁸ It suggests that by knowing the nature of the *things* present in a particular system, space, and time, we can divine the ways in which those *things* influenced, constrained, and compelled one another. That is to say that every *thing* has dependences: preconditions that must be in place for the object or condition both to exist and to be necessary. The existence of a car presupposes the existence of wheels, for instance, as well as sheet metal, factories, and paved roads. This holds true for non-physical concepts as well: illegitimacy of birth first requires the concept of legally defined marriages, the social desire to restrict sexual couplings to within those constrained relationships, and some notion of personal property that can be privately passed down to subsequent generations.

Along with dependences, Hodder argues, *things* also come with affordances, the consequences of their existence. Once an object has been culturally integrated, the behavioural patterns of the humans who interact with it change so that suddenly being without it would cause visible disruption. These entanglements themselves change over time, as new technologies, modes of interaction, and societal rhythms evolve.⁹ Prior to the rise of modern fast fashion, for example, the expense of clothing and textiles compelled the wearer to either learn and practise washing and mending, or to organize domestic arrangements with someone who had those skills. Marriage or labour exchange were two solutions to that need, each coming with its own extensive series of connections and prerequisites. On the physical side, mending a torn garment required scissors, thread, and a needle, access to which depended on either the presence of a local manufacturer or someone importing sewing tools, which in turn relied on the existence of trade networks and the availability of either money or goods for barter and export. Those entanglements also change over time. Since

the 1990s, a torn T-shirt has instead connected the owner to networks that include clothing sweatshops in Indonesia, big-box stores with low-price policies, and the continuing economic erosion of the middle class. In this way, one seemingly simple aspect of life – wearing clothing – embedded people in a series of networked processes that existed in various states of interdependent tension.¹⁰

Hodder and other scholars who have worked with the metaphor of entanglement suggest that the webs of engagements present in any given set of relationships can be determined by close examination, and that the objects and relationships in turn generate semi-predictable types of tensions between them. I posit the reverse to be true as well: once the shape of a network is known, and surviving *things* put into position, we should then be able to hypothesize with some degree of confidence which *things* are still missing. Specifically, by exploring the connections and the processes that archaeologists Lindsay Der and Francesca Fernandini have called “feedback loops,” I argue that it is possible to reconstruct some of the factors that time and destruction have removed from the modern record.¹¹ That is, by building the rest of the puzzle to the best of our ability, we can determine the shapes of missing pieces.

Pre-deportation Acadian dress is the perfect case study for this methodology, situating a nascent Acadian fashion system within its specific context in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Through a close examination of surviving artifacts connected with textile use and production, as well as an exploration of the specific entanglements that affected Acadian material culture, we can produce a finer-grained, more detailed look at what Acadians were wearing. That in turn tells us new things about how the Acadian domestic and sartorial worlds were shaped, how they reacted to change, and how others reacted to the changes in them. Historian Régis Brun first tackled this question, analyzing coastal traffic and trade records that revealed some Acadian engagement in contemporary fashion.¹² Integrating archaeological data and further contemporary documentation into the analysis reveals even more nuance. What we find during this decoding process is a society active in trade networks and the burgeoning capitalist economy. A combination of factors, including geography and local environment, cross-cultural contact, and the intriguing role Acadia played in local and international trade, came together to mark Acadia as a society distinct from that of New England and New France. At the same time, residents were not isolated from the prevailing whims of fashion. Rather, the development of distinctly Acadian styles in different communities reveals both their awareness of and participation in fashion trends of the metropolises, and the simultaneous development of not one but multiple regional fashion vernaculars.

If this is the case, then why did contemporary descriptions and commentary paint the Acadians as rustic and self-sufficient, at a distant remove from the mercantile marketplace? I suggest this was because the traditional image of Acadian settlement as a land of simple agricultural labourers appealed to the imperial designs of both England and France.¹³ Acadia was to be developed as a breadbox for the colonies, a farming-specific space to generate profitable produce and, as John Reid has posited, to act both as an arm of settlement-colonialism and a tool for the British empire.¹⁴ Once agriculture had become well established in places like the Minas basin, grain exports became an income-generating activity for Acadia, as did livestock sales for Beaubassin.¹⁵ In seventeenth-century France, however, particularly those areas from which Acadians had originally emigrated, grain was rarely sold as a cash crop and cultural focus was not on the farm as a profit centre. Rural incomes in places like Brittany often relied instead on the sale of women's labour and of textile goods produced by the female heads of household.¹⁶ The different income stream in the settlements, focusing on grain and cattle, freed Acadian women's labour to be deployed in new directions – no longer directed toward spinning and weaving textiles for sale, but into activities like decorative needlework for personal and community use. This change in focus demonstrates some of the shifting priorities of a newly emerging social identity alongside a newly forming political self.

Much has been made of the ways in which the forces of Atlantic empire found the Acadians to be something of a headache, politically speaking. Various authors have placed the blame on imperial concerns over Acadian political agency, how settling families claimed and managed land use, their blurred social structures with lack of a distinct elite group, and their engagement with Indigenous communities.¹⁷ One factor that has not yet been considered is the way in which the Acadians rejected colonial control over their physical bodies – not solely in the ways their movements were limited, and land claims organized, but in how they moved away from the sartorial control of the metropole. Colonial power was vested in control, over colonists and their environments as well as their bodies. Keeping those populations culturally aligned with European sensibilities and social aesthetics, including concerns about nakedness and civility, meant that the uncertainties and anxieties surrounding new spaces could be kept in check.¹⁸

Acadians blurred the social boundaries between European and North American, and their new environment inspired the development of a new visual culture. Similar movement towards a more syncretic style of dress occurred in other colonial spaces, as explorations of colonial Louisiana have shown.¹⁹ These changes demonstrate a shift away from early modern French emphasis on the particular styles and manners that

helped define the social structure of the ancien régime. This added to the sense that the Acadians were rejecting their inherited aesthetics and Eurocentric understandings of the “civilized body” and becoming unpredictable.

Elite culture of the early modern era in France saw emphasis on appearance and manners as windows to states of being, and tensions built when people did not dress in a manner that befit their social and economic stations.²⁰ Literature and manners instruction of the time emphasized the role of dress and comportment in defining and demonstrating identity, and the emerging Acadian fashion systems disrupted those closely held systems. In so doing, Acadian dress was partially responsible for the growing perception of Acadians as a group whose values differed from those of the Continent. This shifting entanglement created a new form of tension – anxiety related to that waning sense of imperial hold over a people who were increasingly difficult to define.



THE HISTORY OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY is often traced in goods. In the production revolution, the consumer revolution, the beginnings of capitalist consumption, and search for catalyst commodities, we attempt to define the ways in which objects have shaped the beginnings of the modern era. Production and consumption are not, however, the only means by which material things shape and define us. The combined acts of deconstruction and reconstitution, blending old and new into a third liminal creation, is an intrinsic part of the colonial settler experience. It can be seen as a simultaneous reshaping of both objects and the identities defined by those same objects: the touch of the human alters the landscape, and the nature of the landscape inherently alters the ways in which humans can touch and shape it. Moving into a new environmental and cultural space, the French settlers who would become the Acadians over the course of the next 120 years were shaped by their new context, and they shaped it in return. Like the red duffel wool described by Boston merchant Brook Watson, Acadians unravelled the cultural understandings they had brought with them, laid them on their looms next to new threads from their new home, and rewove them into something both unique and still grounded in their symbolic past.

The artifacts described here came predominantly from sites in Kespukwitk, Sipekne'katik, and Siknikt (around the Minas Basin and the Chignecto Isthmus), and the addition of Fortress Louisbourg in Unama'kik (Cape Breton). Recovered during archaeological excavations between 1960 and 2012, the assemblages from Beaubassin,

Belleisle, the Melanson Site, and the Acadian homes in Fortress Louisbourg give us a cross-section of different modes of Acadian life, domestic conditions, and a sense of urban versus rural priorities. In some places, it has proven useful to compare and contrast the evidence recovered from these sites against assemblages from other colonial sites of the period, particularly the archaeological reports on Fort Michilimackinac, a strategic outpost on the south side of the Straits of Mackinac, in Michigan, and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century domestic sites excavated through the Strawberry Banke Museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.²¹

In addition, this book interrogates both competing notions of pre-deportation Acadia: as a series of isolated settlements of French-acculturated colonists on the outskirts of empire, or a fully realized ethnicity and community distinct and separate from surrounding peoples. The evidence suggests instead that Acadians in these Nova Scotia settlements were engaging with contemporary fashion and the transatlantic marketplace. They participated more heavily in colonial French and English culture than previously understood from examination of documents alone.

Adding the evidentiary base of the artifact assemblages opens new directions for discussion, and provides evidence that Acadians were consciously using clothing as a means of communication, as well as a tool for cultural and economic connection. We can see from the objects left behind that there was more than one Acadian dress vernacular; the assemblages from Beaubassin, Belleisle, Melanson, and in houses occupied by Acadian families resident in Louisbourg are all that little bit different from each other. Given time, those differences might well have continued to grow and develop into a set of distinct and identifiable Acadian styles, but the process was indelibly altered thanks to the traumatic events of 1755.

Objects worn on the body, whether made locally or imported, have a great deal to say about the world in which the Acadians lived, and how they engaged with it. Studies have been done along these lines on foodways, glass, and architecture, and this book adds clothing and dress-related artifacts into the discussion. The following chapters examine the geographical and historical contexts of four Acadian settlements in Nova Scotia, the tools used to manufacture and decorate the textiles and garments, the varieties of textiles and fibres to which Acadians had access, the notions and accessories that completed their outfits, the garments themselves, and finally overviews of the wardrobes and local fashions from the sites. Far from being isolated, the Acadians were indelibly connected to the wider Atlantic commercial network, the mercantile marketplace, and the global network of things.

The Acadian World

[S]ince the English have been masters of the country, the residents who were lodged near the fort have for the most part abandoned their houses and have gone to settle on the upper part of the river. They have made their clearings below and above this great meadow.¹

WHEN IT COMES TO CHOOSING OUR CLOTHES, context matters. Factors such as the climate and weather, the availability of materials, and social expectations all directly influence what we wear, and how we wear it. These preconditions can be ancient and all-pervasive, like wet winter weather on the northeast coast of North America, or short-lived and individual, as with a fashion fad or a preference for the colour pink. Geography, climate, environment, religion, social pressures, age, and expectations surrounding gender all contribute, as do factors including access to materials, participation in local and international trade, and the economic status of participants in purchase and production. In order to understand what people wore and why they wore it, we need to know the world in which they made those choices. Only then can we begin the task of reconstruction.

The geography, climate, political, and social environments surrounding the French settlers in Acadia played significant roles in the evolution of their dress culture. Over the course of the century-plus between settlement and deportation, different groups of Acadians began to differentiate themselves and their dress from one another, as well as from the fashion systems of France, New England, and New France. This differentiation was spurred on by a complex intersection of environmental and social factors, including the physical environment as well as the changing nature of their contact with the Mi'kmaq, the distances between Acadian settlements and seats of imperial power, Acadians' commercial position and trade habits vis-à-vis New France and New England, and the influences of the dominant cultures present in the migrants' points

of origin. Along with these macro forces we also find the micro – the networks of families, trading partners, and individuals living and working in the settlements.²

Environmental conditions play a large role in what materials are practical and available, and these conditions can include everything from the geography of a region to the available flora and fauna. The moisture content and pH of the soil determine the types of crops that can be grown, as does the number of healthy bodies available for agricultural labour. The presence or absence of calm harbours and cleared trails alters the possibilities for trade, and the size and abundance of fur-bearing animals determine whether one hide or twenty is needed to cover an adult human body. Those preconditions alone, however, are not enough to explain dress choice. The economic realities of a region also play a powerful role, both in the availability of traded materials, the diversity or homogeneity of access to resources, and the nature of existing networks of exchange.

Acadia is often described as remote, a borderland made inaccessible by multiple-week travel times from Quebec and France, and the relative dangers of sailing on the capricious Bay of Fundy. The geographic isolation, it has been suggested, made Acadian farmers increasingly vulnerable and self-reliant, each homestead working semi-independently and engaging in infrequent trade for items that could not be produced on-site.³ The region, however, was far from uninhabited or isolated. Sikniht (the Chignecto Isthmus) had been a hub for trade and engagement with the outside world prior to the arrival of European settlers and continued to be so following their arrival. New scholarship instead describes these kinds of cultural and environmental borderlands as bridges, regions of intersecting and overlapping engagement between peoples. Coastal spaces in particular are regions shaped by these perpetual negotiations, the spaces at the water's edge defined by constant movement and change.⁴

Acadian occupation spread upward from La Hève and outward from Port Royal in the mid- through late seventeenth century, settlers establishing a series of homesteads and villages along the rivers, marshes, and coasts. The traditional interpretation of the engagement between existing Mi'kmaw communities and the new arrivals was at first one of peace and mutually beneficial engagement, including intermarriages, mixed settlements, and military assistance against the English.⁵ Surviving parish registers do not indicate large numbers of intermarriages between non-elite Acadians and the Mi'kmaw community, however, though some families undoubtedly maintained closer relationships than others. Time played a role, communities drawing closer together when mutual support was needed, drifting apart later as their political goals diverged.⁶ More engagement certainly took place at trading hubs than would have been seen at predominantly farming-focused sites, but even then the answer is not so clear-cut.

Pre-Colonial Mi'kma'ki

The Mi'kmaw Nation has inhabited the northeast of North America for at least 13,000 years. Referring to themselves as L'nuk – The People – groups, according to one tradition, originally migrated to their territory from the southwest of Turtle Island, the continent of North America.⁷ Mi'kma'ki extended over 130,000 km² at its height, including Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, parts of New Brunswick, northern Maine, and into the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec. Estimates of the population for pre-contact Kiskukewe'k L'nuk give numbers of about 3,500–6,000 people, while others have suggested as many as five times that amount.⁸ Their seasonal rounds following the harvests included hook, spear, weir, and basket fishing in the spring and summer, shellfish harvesting, and the collection of seabirds and eggs during the spring, summer, and autumn, while winter hunting revolved around moose, beaver, bear, otter, caribou, and other mammals. Travel was primarily along waterways, using cedar and birchbark canoes.⁹ Proximity to the water shaped their material culture, with groups living in the interior adapting to wetland resources, and those on the coast developing technologies more suited to marine resource gathering. Their annual routine moved them from coastal regions in the summer farther inland in winter. Subsistence activities included fishing, hunting, gathering, and small-scale horticulture. A cultural mandate for sharing resources and communal oversight of lands encouraged policies of stewardship and harvesting only enough to account for current needs, rather than viewing land, flora, and fauna as profit-generating commodities.¹⁰

The Atlantic Maritime Ecozone, of which Mi'kma'ki is a large part, experiences cool summers and mild winters overall, as a result of proximity to the Atlantic Ocean. The relative humidity is high, and the area is prone to storms and hurricanes. The soils are highly acidic, which impedes the preservation of organic materials except in extraordinary circumstances, but which supports mixed coniferous and deciduous forest, and a wide range of flora and fauna. Many areas of the highlands are ill-equipped for farming, and the short growing season makes agriculture difficult. The lowlands, especially the marshlands of the Chignecto Isthmus and the Bay of Fundy, are much better situated for agricultural use.

While not nearly as extensive as the practices of fire ecology and fire hunting among Indigenous groups farther south, the Mi'kmaq did have the small-scale practice of very carefully managed controlled burns to change the landscape – clearing space for berry bushes, and firing meadows to improve fertility.¹¹ Desirable plants were planted and maintained for small-scale use, and regular campsites enriched with

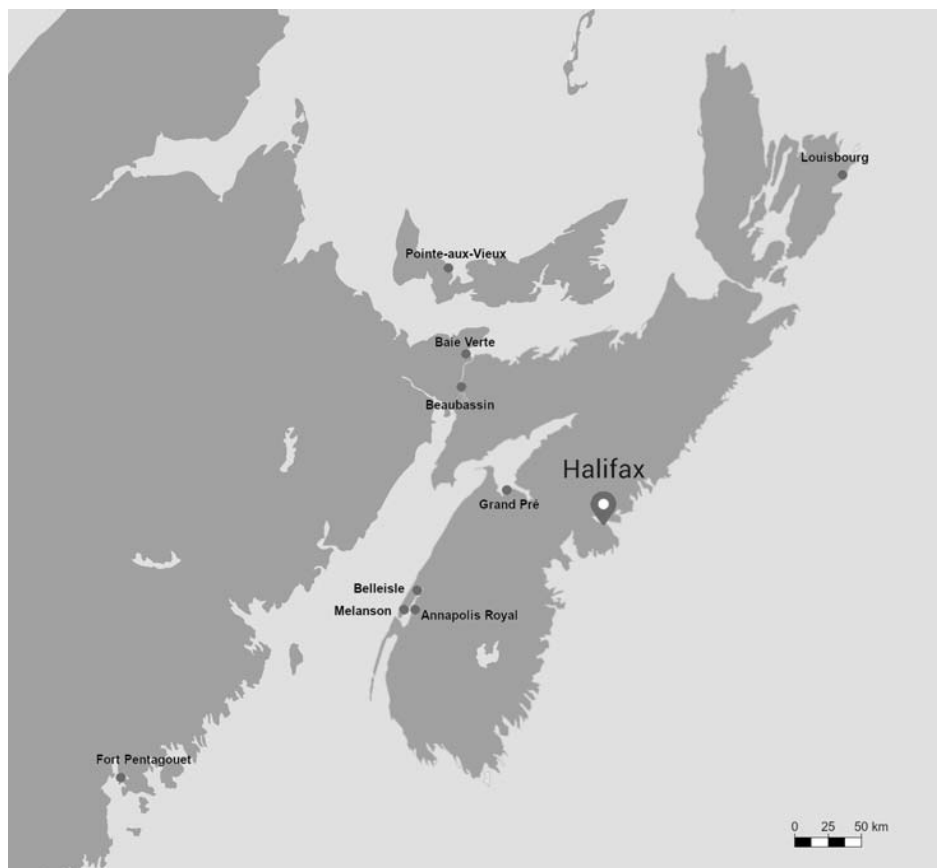


FIGURE 1.1 • Map of selected Acadian settlements and major locations.

compost and burned wood over thousands of years of occupation. Agricultural activities took place throughout the year, including the tapping of maple trees for syrup, and the growing and harvesting of tobacco. Local experts have suggested that the Mi'kmaq also farmed crops like pumpkins and beans, trading them with the Abenaki farther south. Hunting grounds were allocated by district chiefs, and prior to the fur trade protocols were in place for game management.¹²

Descriptions of Mi'kmaw dress at the time of contact come solely from European perspectives, subject to cultural bias and misunderstandings. Seventeenth-century writings from Nicolas Denys, Marc Lescarbot, and Abbé Biard describe wardrobes based on leather, a preference that began to shift once tightly woven wool fabrics called strouds were made available as trade goods.¹³ Denys described men's main