

A-Cobourg - History (05-01)

# The mysterious case of the vanished islands

Samuel de Champlain is considered to be one of the greatest of French explorers in the history of North America. Beginning in the early 1600s, he explored and mapped most of the new land from the Atlantic Ocean up the St. Lawrence to Lake Ontario. Where he was unable to explore for himself, he relied on information from other



**Our Amazing Past**

**James F. Robinson**

Frenchmen such as Brule or from trusted Indian guides. His maps

are considered to be among the most accurate and are preserved in museums in France.

However, one of Champlain's maps contains what appears to be glaring mistakes. It was made on his expedition up the St. Lawrence and Ottawa River to Georgian Bay and down to the north shore of Lake Ontario. In this case, he relied on Indian guides for information on Lake Ontario. Champlain was able to pinpoint major rivers and bays and draw a

good representation of the oblong shape of the lake itself. But he also drew in numerous islands including two very large ones, each estimated to be about 15 miles long and seven miles wide. One island was situated near Niagara off the American shore. The

other was located on the Canadian side close to Cobourg and just west of Prince Edward County. There are no such islands today.

Was Champlain's information wrong? Did the islands exist? French priests and explorers, travelling through the area over 40 years later, found no such islands as Champlain's map indicated. Had Champlain's islands disappeared during the 40-year interval?

In 1663, a great earthquake, estimated to be at least seven to eight on today's Richter scale, struck the whole of the St. Lawrence River valley, doing considerable damage. Bells in French Canadian villages rang by themselves. Houses split wide open and deep

cracks ripped through fields. Many small rivers dried up while others changed courses. Trees were uprooted and thrown long distances. Midway between Tadousac and Quebec City, two mountains collapsed completely and the island of Coudres rose up and doubled in size. One hundred and fifty miles upriver at Lake Ontario, the results of the great earthquake must have been similar if not the same in destructiveness.

Did the great earthquake of 1663 cause Champlain's islands to sink beneath the waves like the legendary Atlan-

tis? Some new evidence seems to suggest that this is possible. Present day hydrographic maps show shallow areas of water just off Alcott, New York, and between New Colborne and Cobourg, Ontario. The location of these two features are the same as the two large and mysterious islands Champlain drew on his otherwise accurate map.

Are these two features Champlain's mysterious islands? Perhaps we will never know for sure. Champlain's disappearing islands remains one of the great mysteries of our amazing past!