



A Fishy Story: The Mitchelmores of Green Island Cove

by Michael Mitchelmore (Member 4462)

Green Island Cove (which I shall abbreviate to GIC) is a small fishing village on the west coast of the Great Northern Peninsula in Newfoundland. GIC is extraordinary in that half of its 250 or so inhabitants share my surname, Mitchelmore. How did this happen?



Green Island Cove in summer

Devon and Newfoundland links

Well, it really is a fishy story. English and French fishermen first discovered the rich fishing grounds around Newfoundland in the sixteenth century. For the next two centuries, fishermen would travel across the Atlantic in April, catch large quantities of cod and halibut, clean and salt the fish and extract cod liver oil. They would then sell their produce to merchants before leaving in September, many picking up fruit and wine from the Mediterranean before returning to their home ports. The Devonshire port of Dartmouth played a particularly important role in this transatlantic trade: between 1675 and 1681, it was home to over 40% of the English fishermen (1709 out of a total of 4033)¹.

Although some of the merchants settled in Newfoundland, very few of the early fishermen stayed over winter because of the thick sea ice. The east coast, centred on the present capital of St John's, was the first area to be settled. More fishing villages were gradually established around the south and north coasts and eventually on the east coast, with the result that by the beginning of the nineteenth century most of the fishing was done by settlers rather than visitors.

Thomas Mitchelmore (1825-1907) was one of the last Dartmouth fishermen to settle in Newfoundland. All the GIC Mitchelmores, as well as many more Mitchelmores scattered over Canada (nearly 400 in all), are descended from him.

A life of Thomas

In 1841 Thomas was recorded as an apprentice living in Bayard's Cove, the main harbour area in Dartmouth, with his brothers Richard and John. They had all been born about 12 km away in Stokenham, but Richard had married a Dartmouth girl in 1838 and Thomas and John probably moved to Dartmouth at about the same time. Richard's father-in-law was a mariner and it

seems likely that Thomas was apprenticed to him. I have been unable to find him on any crew list, but a Thomas Mauchemore (a variant spelling of Mitchelmore, common in Dartmouth at the time) was recorded in the UK Register of Seamen's Tickets for the period 1845-1854.

Pat Mitchelmore² deduced from various events recorded around 1850 that Thomas must have arrived in GIC about 1845. What led him to settle there? One theory, supported by anecdotal evidence of similar events later³, is that he may have jumped ship to escape cruel conditions on board and found one of the few remaining unoccupied harbours in which to settle.



Thomas Mitchelmore in later life

Thomas married Elizabeth Duncan at Anchor Point in 1853, but she died early and Thomas ("widower aged twenty-eight of GIC, late of Dartmouth, Devon, England") married Maria Billet of Flower's Cove the following year. His second wife also died early, and Thomas married Fanny Whelan of Flower's Cove in 1858. Their six sons were the foundation of the GIC Mitchelmore dynasty, with sixteen Mitchelmore grandsons born by 1917.

The growth of Green Island Cove

Life in GIC and the many similar villages along that part of the west coast of Newfoundland was hard. There is little fertile soil and much exposed rock near the coast, but there are extensive inland forests. When fishing was impossible, work opportunities included cutting timber and hunting seals. Until the coming of an arterial road, electricity and telephones, people had to rely on growing their own vegetables, raising a few chickens, sheep or cattle, hunting for rabbits or moose, and hauling timber from the forest to build their houses – not unlike the "ag labs" their English ancestors had been, in fact. Thomas and his family were the only inhabitants of GIC until Scotsman James McLean joined them in the 1870s. In the 1891 census, the village contained thirty-eight people, all Mitchelmores or McLeans. These two families have continued to dominate until the present day; for example, 69% of the named gravestones in the local cemetery are memorials to Mitchelmores and 24% to McLeans.⁴ In a population of 120 listed in the 1945 census, 67% were Mitchelmores and 32% were McLeans. However, the almost complete dominance of these two families may be diminishing. In the latest available voters' list (1996), only 53% are Mitchelmores and 28% are McLeans.⁵

The problem solved

So why do so many people in GIC share one of only two surnames? Each village on the west coast shows a similar pattern. A particularly extreme case is Anchor Point, where the 1945 census revealed that 134 of the 143 residents bore the surname Genge. Isolation has played a part in this phenomenon, of course. Until the arrival of the arterial road, the only way to travel between villages was by foot, dog cart or boat. But, as far as I am aware, no such surname concentration has occurred in similarly isolated areas of the English-speaking world.

A GIC Mitchelmore recently suggested to me that the reason for this phenomenon was the local tradition that a bride should leave her village and live in her husband's community. I took a closer look at marriages of male GIC Mitchelmores in the period 1850-1950. Among the twenty couples where the bride came from a different village, sixteen lived in GIC after their marriage. That seems conclusive enough, but was this tradition really so unusual?

To find out, I looked at the marriages of male Mitchelmores born in Thomas's home parish of Stokenham in the period 1750-1850 when transport in rural Devon was still rather primitive. In this case, among the fourteen couples where the bride came from a different parish, only two lived in Stokenham after their marriage. The other twelve couples were equally divided between living in the bride's parish and in a third parish. Quite a different tradition -- or no tradition at all.

A third explanation, and the possible origin for the GIC marriage tradition, lies in the nature of the men's occupation. In the early days of the Newfoundland fish trade, Devon fishermen vied with each other for the best fishing spots and forced late-comers to find other harbours. Later, fishermen crossed the Atlantic as passengers and worked for local merchants who assigned them to specific harbours. As a result, it would not have been at all easy for a settled fisherman to move to a different fishing ground; he would naturally expect his wife to move to his community. By comparison, it was relatively easy for Devonshire husbandmen and agricultural labourers to find land or employment in a neighbouring parish, so the couple could look farther afield.

Epilogue

When Thomas was living in Dartmouth, my great great grandfather John was running the Custom House Inn about 150m from Bayard's Cove. They must surely have known each



Fifty cousins: GIC, July 2018

other, but what they probably did not know was that they were fourth cousins: both were descendants of Peter Mitchelmore of Stokenham (1662-1725). In fact, I am a seventh cousin (possibly once or twice removed) of all the GIC Mitchelmores. Y-DNA analysis has confirmed our relationship: my Y-DNA differs from that of one GIC Mitchelmore in only 1 of 37 markers.

Fascinated by their story of the GIC Mitchelmores, my wife and I recently visited GIC. We were given an overwhelming welcome by all the cousins we met, and I had the privilege of talking about our family history to over fifty of them one evening. We wish to record our special thanks to Rhoda, her son Kevin and his wife Connie for hosting us and for arranging the meeting. ■

References

1. W George Handcock (1989). So longe as there comes noe women: Origins of English settlement in Newfoundland. St John's, Newfoundland: Breakwater Books.
2. Pat Mitchelmore (1973). Green Island Cove, Newfoundland: 1800-1972. History research paper, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, Newfoundland.
3. Our seniors: Their lives, their stories (2017). Port au Choix, Newfoundland: Heritage Committee.
4. This and similar statistics reported in this article were derived from data available on the Newfoundland's Grand Banks site at <http://ngb.chebucto.org>.
5. Consulted at the Newfoundland & Labrador Provincial Resource Library, St John's.

Michael is studying the surname Mitchelmore with variants Michelmore, Mitchamore, Mitchmore, Muchamore, Muchemore, Muchmore, Mutchmore and can be contacted at mitchelmore@one-name.org