

Spring 2012

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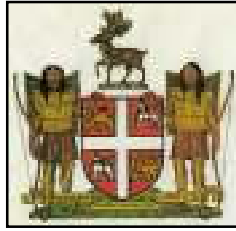
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The Newfoundland Historical Society
1905-2012



Newsletter

Following the piece on the Agricultural History Society in our last edition, we thought you might be interested in this article, specifically on root cellars.

ROOT CELLARS: TRADITIONAL FOOD SECURITY

Root cellars are everywhere. Elliston alone boasts 135 root cellars and calls itself "The Root Cellar Capital of the World". These ubiquitous, homemade structures dot the landscape, a powerful reminder of food security in the history of the province.

Every fishing family and farmer had gardens to supplement their diet with vegetables: potatoes, turnip, carrot, and cabbage. But Newfoundland and Labrador is characterized by a short growing season and a long cold winter period. Summer production required winter storage. This was particularly true with reference to potatoes which from the late eighteenth century became a staple in the diet. Potatoes spoil if frozen. The answer was the root cellar. Today they litter the landscape in coastal communities; they linger on, indestructible, in abandoned communities; they are hidden under former farm houses in the City of St John's.

There is much to admire in the ingenious design and skilled construction of a root cellar. Local materials were used: rocks and wood, the latter sometimes salvaged from the sea, and barrel staves, even discarded punts. More recently, cement has been used. Root cellars were carefully constructed: plumb walls, square corners, levelled floor, sturdy roof supports, and snug insulation. They must be dark and cool, cleverly insulated to maintain a temperature which is cool in the summer and above freezing in the winter. There must be provision for ventilation to take off accumulated moisture.



Root cellar,
Port Rexton

Root cellars have been built in a variety of designs. One popular type is a rock-lined dug-out, either in the side of a hill or under an earthen mound. In these, insulation is provided by the hill itself. The entrance might be at ground level, or on the top, protected by a neat shed with a hatch down to the cellar below. Hay piled in the shed above the hatch can provide further insulation. In areas where rock dominates, the cellars are built more above ground than below, typically a wooden mini-tilt walled up and over with sods, further insulated with sawdust, or birch rinds, with a hatch on the top. In areas where there is a greater depth of soil, as in the Codroy Valley, the cellars are dug out under the house with either an indoor or an outdoor access.

In Labrador there is a tradition of summer vegetable gardens and there are farms. However, in areas of very severe weather, a separate root cellar was not practical. A cellar under the dwelling was more likely, and a reliance on bottling, jamming and pickling.

Typically, a person can stand upright in the cellar. A family cellar usually has a footprint of about 9x12 feet; an institutional cellar or a commercial cellar might be 15x30 feet. The cellar is lined with wooden bins which separate the different kinds of vegetables. They were also used "to set the jelly"! More recently, it has been discovered that they are perfect for forcing spring bulbs.

Children were delegated to fetch vegetables from the root cellar, and universally, we have been told, they hated it! They were scared of the dark, windowless, silent cellar. And its resident population of carpenters. The adults had a different view. There was satisfaction and pride in having enough potatoes stored in the cellar to last to the next harvest. This was, in modern parlance, "food security."

The Agricultural History Society of Newfoundland and Labrador surveyed root cellars in the St John's area last summer. It quickly became apparent that there are dozens of cellars in any community. A few gardeners have built root cellars in recent years; others have maintained their old cellar. But the truth is, the majority of the cellars have been abandoned, along with the gardens. A hole. A jumble of beautiful rocks. The wooden roof structure long gone.

The cleverly designed, ubiquitous root cellar can now be respected as a heritage structure. In the history of our province, it is an ingenious symbol of survival by successful storage of summer production through the winter period.

The Agricultural History Society of Newfoundland and Labrador, in partnership with the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, has placed profiles of about 100 root cellars on the Digital Archives Initiative, Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University.



Colliers



St. John's

Jo Shawyer

WE'VE MOVED!

Our office has now moved from Elizabeth Towers to the second floor of 15 Hallet Crescent (off Austin St., behind the Avalon Mall). However, our telephone number, email and postal addresses all remain unchanged.

FEES TO INCREASE BY \$5 IN SEPTEMBER

Please note that, due to increased costs of the *Newfoundland Quarterly*, our membership fees will be increasing by \$5 in September 2012.

BOOKS BY MEMBERS: *THE NEWFOUNDLAND DOG*.

Robert Parsons' book *The Newfoundland Dog: True Stories of Courage, Loyalty and Friendship* has recently been published by Flanker Press. It contains sixty stories in eight different categories, including banking schooners, mascots, and war, in locales from Sable Island and Placentia Bay to New York. The book is beautifully illustrated by Mel D'Souza. Robert has also updated his website at <http://www.atlanticwrecks.com/>.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AND STORY LECTURE

At the AGM held at the April meeting a new Executive Committee was elected (for the composition of the new committee, see p. 1). As usual, the AGM was conducted in conjunction with the annual Story lecture. This year it was given by Dr. Jeff Webb, who spoke about Dr. Story himself and his prodigious contribution to Newfoundland studies.

CABOT ARTICLE AVAILABLE ONLINE – TEMPORARILY



Cabot statue at Confederation Building, St. John's. Photo: M. Wilkshire

Many members will recall with pleasure the talk on John Cabot given in 2010 at The Battery Hotel by Dr. Evan Jones of the University of Bristol. His work on the Cabot Project (see <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/history/research/cabot.html>) is ongoing, with the collaboration of, among others, Dr. Peter Pope of Memorial University, who is exploring the Carbonear angle. Dr. Jones has advised us that one of his associates, Francesco Guidi Bruscoli, has recently published a lecture that will be of interest to Cabot scholars: 'John Cabot and his Italian Financiers', *Historical Research* (Published online, April 2012). This lecture has received good coverage in the Canadian press, notably in the *National Post* (see



<http://www.nationalpost.com/Voyage+discovery/6538861/story.html>). Dr. Jones has persuaded the publishers to make this article freely available online, but this free access will come to an end in October 2012, after which a substantial fee will be required. Those interested are invited to go to <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2281.2012.00597.x/abstract>.



French bake oven (collapsed), Baie Verte, Newfoundland (probably 19th century).

These structures found at various locations on the French Shore of Newfoundland were built of bricks imported from France and covered with sod for insulation. They allowed French fishermen to enjoy fresh bread daily.

Photo: M. Wilkshire.

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Membership Fees: Regular or Institutional \$35 / Life \$400. Membership entitles you to a 30% off Heritage Canada membership
Note 1 : Membership includes a subscription to the Newfoundland Quarterly and three Newsletters per year, and are valid for 12 mos. from the date of payment of the fee. Your expiry date will appear at the bottom left of your mailing label; the figures on the bottom right are a mailing code.

Note 2: membership will be increased to \$40 in September 2012.

Donations are always welcome! And remember that memberships make great gifts; gift cards are available from the NHS office.

- Would you like to save paper and receive our Newsletter electronically (in colour)?
- Would you like to be added to our list to be notified of upcoming events?
- Would you like to be removed from the list of those receiving notification of upcoming events?

Please check the relevant box(es).

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