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PAST PRESENT FUTURE

# the trident

The Newsletter of the Newfoundland Historic Trust

Dec 2000/Jan 2001

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### President's Message

The fall/winter season has arrived and with it a new – or at least slightly revamped – executive of the Newfoundland Historic Trust. After three years as president, George Courage (a mainstay of the Trust who had previously served a two-year presidential term and in a variety of other positions) has stepped down to become past-president and I have become president. I do so without a great deal of knowledge of many of the issues surrounding built heritage, but with confidence that at the feet of those who know a great deal more I will learn. My main job for the foreseeable future is to look to the organizational aspects of the Trust in hopes of building a stronger organization that is responsive to its membership, and involves its membership, in a way that we have not seen in recent years. This will not be an easy task for an organization that lacks staff of any sort, or an office, or even a dedicated phone number, and is dependent entirely on volunteer effort. For the efforts of the Trust's executive, past and present, I am already deeply in debt.

One of our first steps has been to establish a committee structure and to begin filling positions. Whereas committee chairs are executive members, committee members can be drawn from the general membership of the Trust. The Preservation Committee chaired by Shane O'Dea, and including executive members George Courage and Dale Jarvis, will act as the public voice of the Trust. Its

mandate is to respond to preservation activity by alerting the Trust and the media to situations that require commendation or criticism. Membership is chaired by Ann Bell, while Dale Jarvis serves as the Trust's webmaster. The Trust's Program Committee is supported by John Mate, a recent addition to the executive, and the Newman Vaults Committee by John O'Dea. Jackie Feltham, CGA, is treasurer. George Courage continues to serve as the Trust's representative on the Association of Heritage Industries Steering Committee, and Gerard Hayes, the Trust's secretary, as its representative on the City's Heritage Advisory Committee.

We are actively planning for the year ahead. The Newman Vaults, a provincial historic site on Water Street West, have absorbed a great deal of the Trust's attention over the past number years. With the help of the provincial Department of Works, Services and Transportation the Vaults have been stabilized to the point where they could be open to the public for a month this past summer (and shame on any of you who failed to visit!). More ambitious plans in terms of displays, interpretation and programming are in hand for this summer. The release of the report of the Downtown St. John's Strategy for Economic Development and Heritage Preservation early in 2001 is eagerly anticipated and will be a focus for Trust activity. Additional programming is under discussion. A new brochure is being planned, and a new website will soon be launched. In short, the Trust is looking forward to a full year.

Patricia O'Brien  
President, Newfoundland Historic Trust

# Why Do the Rooms Have to Obliterate Fort Townshend?

by Dr Peter Pope

Probably everyone in town is familiar with the story. The government of Newfoundland and Labrador commits serious funding to construction of a much-needed and long-awaited public building. To keep costs reasonable, a committee decides to put it on crown land at Fort Townshend -- which has the added advantage of being an accessible downtown location. A study determines that there are extensive remains of 18th-century structures on the site. What does the Province do? When the government of the day faced this question in 1975, they relocated the new Constabulary Headquarters, off the footprint of what was already recognized as a National Historic Site. But that was then.

Fast forward a quarter of a century. Fort Townshend is now about 225 years old, about half as old as St John's itself. Its massive stone walls still reflect the importance of this place to the early modern north Atlantic empires of Britain and France. It is and always will be where Newfoundland's first resident Governor, Admiral Pickmore, lived and died. At the turn of the 19th century, the Irish conspirators met behind its walls. It's still Lieutenant David Buchan's barracks; it's still the place where Shanawdithit met the governor of the day; and it's still where the Camps housed families burned out of their homes by the disastrous fire of 1846. How does the Department of Works Services treat the site now? So far they have obliterated two 10 m stretches of the Grand Battery, one for an elevator shaft and one for a stairwell. The Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation tells us that this is in the interest of "world class" interpretation.

What's wrong with that? Don't museums and interpretation centres need stairs and elevators? Of course they do -- and electrical control rooms and conduit passages and so on. All reasons why ICOMOS, the international body that sets standards for the interpretation of cultural landmarks recommends against the construction of new buildings over massive *in situ* remains. The architects tell us that they are only emulating the very successful *Pointe aux Callieres* museum in downtown Montreal, which is built over standing remains of shops and businesses there. But these are relatively small-scale features, interpreted indoors, following four years of intensive archaeological research, the results of which were sensitively incorporated by a brilliant team of architects and interpreters into a building designed around archaeology. In St John's the architects responsible for "The Rooms" have modified only slightly a design essentially finalized before a spade went into the earth. A few design changes were made for structural rather than interpretative reasons, while the fundamental design concept remains seriously flawed. You can't adequately interpret a fortress meant to dominate St John's harbour by rebuilding bits of it in a basement. Fort Townshend will never stand as it once did, but it could be inexpensively landscaped and interpreted as the dominant city feature it is.

Who is opposed to construction of a new art gallery/archive/museum complex on the most prominent and best-preserved part of Fort Townshend? The nine members of Memorial's Archaeology Unit unanimously petitioned City Council to call for relocation, following an unsuccessful attempt last June to alert the Department of Tourism to the blunder they seemed intent on making. As far as we can make out every professional archaeologist working in Newfoundland and Labrador shares our concerns, as do heritage authorities elsewhere in Canada, the United States, England and Ireland. We've been overwhelmed by the public support we have received for our position. An informal NTV poll put support for relocation at about 80%, so this isn't a minority view, even amongst parts of the arts community.

Why the timing of public opposition to this location? That results from the fact that the Province did not follow recommendations in the study it commissioned on the historic resources of the site. That study of the maps and so on that trace the history of Fort Townshend recommended archaeological assessment of the site, *before* design of the interpretative space. Instead, the Province accepted a design before any archaeological assessment was carried out, so that the extent and excellent preservation of the remains of the Grand Battery and other features came as a surprise both to officials and to most of the archaeological community. That was a mistake, made no doubt out of honest enthusiasm for an appealing design concept. This is no reason to compound the error by clinging adamantly to the original positioning, which seems to have been primarily aimed at visual domination of the skyline.

What is needed right now? We need a pause in construction, before the Public Works Department, whose experience largely consists of blowing rocks out of the way for highways and bridges, does any more damage to this archaeological site. During this pause, the Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation has to be given the funding

and the authority to find a new site for the Rooms, either elsewhere in St John's or elsewhere on the same property, away from the best-preserved standing remains of 18th-century St John's. As City Councillor Shannie Duff has argued, the latter may be the most practical compromise, creating a win-win situation, both for those who fear a delay in construction, as well as for those who fear obliteration of important archaeological features. There are costs associated with this option, realistically in the region of one or two million dollars. We cannot dodge this financial reality and that money can hardly come out of the existing budget for the new gallery/museum/archive. So let us call on the provincial government to make a commitment to the funding necessary to build the Rooms in an appropriate location, removed from the best-preserved, most significant, most distinctive and most prominent part of the original Fort.

Peter Pope is an Associate Professor of Anthropology who teaches Historical Archaeology at Memorial. He has been digging in St John's for over a decade.

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## **Government will proceed with The Rooms development**

Tourism, Culture and Recreation News Release,  
November 7, 2000

Sandra Kelly, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation (Acting), confirmed today that government will proceed with the development of The Rooms, the new cultural and heritage facility to be constructed at Fort Townshend as planned. Last night, St. John's City Council passed a resolution asking government to postpone further development of the facility until a new premier is in place, which will not happen until after a leadership convention in the new year. Minister Kelly indicated that such a postponement would not change government's plans for the development, and would only result in additional costs to the project.

"Both the premier and myself are fully committed to The Rooms project as it has been conceived and the cabinet is unanimous in its support of this project," said Minister Kelly. "It must be understood that to delay the project at this time would mean that construction could not begin until next spring, thereby incurring substantial inflationary construction costs and further risk to the valuable collections of the three institutions. The Rooms represents a significant financial investment in our province's heritage and we are not willing to delay the project to the detriment of those resources."

Government stands behind the project and is confident in the extensive consultation process which culminated in the selection of Fort Townshend as the preferred the site for new building. "Government has continued to consult with a broad range of community groups on this development," added Minister Kelly. "We have conducted a thorough archaeological excavation of the construction site and are confident in our approach both for The Rooms development and for the interpretation of Fort Townshend. We have met with city council to review the project and have corresponded with them on a number of occasions with respect to our position on this development. We feel that our current plan meets the needs of the broadest range of people in this province, and I therefore see no advantage to delaying this important development any further."



*Charles Furey, former Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation in Newfoundland (L) and Labrador discusses the structure of the Grand Battery Wall at Fort Townshend with chief archaeologist Roy Skanes.*

## COMING EVENTS:

- Heritage Day is one of the Heritage Canada's longest standing and best-known initiatives. In 1974 Heritage Canada launched a campaign for a national holiday on the 3rd Monday in February to boost the public appeal of heritage and improve its visibility for all Canadians. Since then, Heritage Canada has encouraged Canadians to celebrate Heritage Day each year. This year, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador will be hosting its fourth annual Heritage Day Celebrations at St. John's City Hall. Heritage Day is a chance for various organizations to come, set up a display, and talk with others about programs and projects of interest to the wider community. This year, the date is Monday, Feb 19th, 2001. The venue is the Foran/Greene Room at City Hall. The event will open at 10 am, and will continue until 3:00 pm. See you there!
- The Museum Association of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Newfoundland and Labrador Section of the Canadian Society for Civil Engineering will be holding a one day workshop entitled "Restoration and Conservation of Heritage Structures". The event will take place Friday, March 9, 2001, 8 am - 5pm, and will include a discussion of restoration and conservation philosophy and strategy options, investigation techniques, foundation and masonry techniques and many other topics. Workshop instructor is Dr. Saeed Mirza. Contact Ute Okshevsky at 722-9034 or email her at uokshevsky@mail.gov.nf.ca for registration information.

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### Membership Form

Fees are \$20 per person, \$20 per family and \$35 for groups, institutions and organizations. Please clip and complete the following form and mail with cheque for membership payable to "The Newfoundland Historic Trust" to The Newfoundland Historic Trust, PO Box 2403, St. John's, NF A1C 6E7

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Town/City: \_\_\_\_\_ Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: (h) \_\_\_\_\_ (w) \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: \_\_\_\_\_