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The Newman Family, Company, and Building.

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By Sarah Mary Roberts

The Newmans

The Newman family, a large mercantile family originating from Dartmouth, England, are well-known in Newfoundland for their historic involvement in the early trading of Newfoundland salt cod fish and port wines from Portugal. The Newman family's presence on the island of Newfoundland lasted for several centuries and many generations.

The earliest reference associated with the Newman family's mercantile activity dates to the late fourteenth century in south Devon, England. At this time, they were shipping English-made cloths and salted fish to Bordeaux, France and Portugal (likely Oporto) in exchange for port wines from these regions (Chang 1974:85; Matthews 1983; MacDonald 1989:144). Other early references to mercantile activities carried out by the family date throughout the fifteenth century. In 1469, John Newman was sending cargoes of cloths to Portugal, and in 1494, Thomas Newman was doing the same. By 1503, Thomas Newman was importing Portuguese wines into Dartmouth (Hunt, Roope, and Company Ltd. 1951:7). The Newman's association with Newfoundland though, did not occur for another eighty-seven years.

In 1589, a John Newman was reported to have sent cargoes of Newfoundland cod fish and tonnes of cod oil from Newfoundland back to England (Hunt et al. 1951:7; Chang 1974:86; Innes 1986). John continued to send cargo from Newfoundland, and in 1602, his cargo had brought nearly one-hundred thousand Newfoundland cod fish to ports in Dartmouth (Hunt et al. 1951:8). From this point onwards, the Newman family was interested in the economic benefits that Newfoundland had to offer them. From this, the Newmans began a trading business on the island to conduct trade with Newfoundland more efficiently (Bill, Earle and Lewis 1974:23).

In the early seventeenth century, the Newmans had acquired their own vessels to send to Newfoundland and the latter part of the century saw the family establishing seasonal fishing stations (Hunt et al. 1951:8; Chang 1974:86-87). The first fishing station constructed by the Newmans in Newfoundland was on the south coast at Pushthrough Island in 1672. By 1679, this seasonal fishing station became a year-round operation with many fishing crews beginning to overwinter there (Hunt et al. 1951:9; Mews 1958:75; Newell 2021). A year later, the construction of three more stations on the south coast followed. The plantation at Harbour Breton was now the most important property owned by the Newmans (Innes 1986:34).

It was around this time that the Newmans had stumbled upon the value of sending their cargo of port wines to Newfoundland to store and age them over the winter months before

sending them off to their final destination at ports in England. It was discovered that this process greatly improved the wine's flavour (Hunt et al. 1951:10). A popular folktale suggests that in 1677, this discovery was accidental and had occurred when one of their vessels from Portugal, stocked with port wines, was veered off its sailing course by French privateers and was too damaged to sail to port in London, England. The vessel and its contents were sent to St. John's, Newfoundland for the winter where the port wines were supposedly stored in caves. Several months later the ship was finally taken to its original destination where it was discovered that the imported wine onboard was exceptionally good (Innes 1986:35; Ball 1998:86; Benson 1998; Mews 1958; Bill et al. 1974:23). Some say the motion of sailing the Atlantic or the climate of Newfoundland created these perfect wines (Mews 1958). Nevertheless, after this discovery, the Newmans would send their cargoes of wine to Newfoundland and store them in cellars to age them to perfection. (Bill et al. 1974:23; Hunt et al. 1951:10).

Prior to 1700, the Newmans were trading and bartering in Newfoundland as independents, operating several fishing stations and finding substantial success in the cod fishery. It was at this time that they combined businesses under one name, "Newman and Company" (Newman and Co.) and established the Newfoundland House (also referred to as store or office; Hunt et al. 1951:11; Innes 1986). This allowed them to expand their operations beyond fishing stations by constructing trading stations to assist in their port wine and salt fish trade. It did not take long before the firm established houses in London, England and Oporto, Portugal, where many of the port wines the Newmans traded were sourced from (Hunt et al. 1951:11-12; Chang 1974:87). This allowed for a highly efficient trade and bartering schedule to emerge with the Newmans bringing ships from England stocked with goods and supplies for Newfoundland. When ships docked in Newfoundland, the items were exchanged with cargoes of Newfoundland cod fish and sent to Portugal where the fish was then exchanged for port wines (Bill et al. 1974:23).

Newman and Company (Newman and Co.)

From 1730-1770, Newman and Co., was controlled by two brothers, Robert Sr. and Richard Newman. Richard controlled the company in the Conception Bay area with his son William, while Robert Sr. oversaw the company operations out of St. John's and some of the south coast (Chang 1974:88,90). In 1757, Robert Sr. had purchased a portion of land, which would compose the Newman and Company premises located on the upper end of the harbour in St. John's, from a gentleman named John Gerrard for less than £600 (Chang 1974:88). The land was complete with "dwelling houses, stores, stages, boats, rooms, meadows, gardens, and other houses with all ways and waterways" (Chang 1974:89). Robert Sr. though played a more active role in the company than his brother Richard; when Robert Sr. died in 1776, he had left the company in the hands of his six sons. His son John took on the firm, which was subsequently rebranded as "John Newman and Company" (Chang 1974:91). This change lasted for several years.

John's other brothers, Robert Jr., Holdsworth, Lydston, and Richard were active in the firm as well, but not for quite some time following the death of their father (Chang 1974:90-91). The firm faced rebranding again in 1780 as "Robert Newman and Company" when John died and Robert Jr. took possession of the family business, with his brothers by his side. The firm was rebranded again in 1806 when it reverted back to its original title as Newman and Company (Chang 1974:92). During this period, the import-export market for the Portuguese port wines the Newmans were supplying began to take off, in addition to the continued market demands for Newfoundland

fish (Chang 1974:98,102).

Under the leadership of Robert Jr. the firm had geographically expanded business greatly. No longer confined to the south coast and St. John's, the company had started establishing offices (houses or stores) on the Burin Peninsula. In 1784, a store was established at Little St. Lawrence near the successful and plentiful fishing grounds of the Grand Banks. By the end of the century, the operation at Little St. Lawrence was conducting trade at the same levels as the St. John's house, prompting the company to concentrate expansion on the Burin Peninsula in the area of Fortune Bay (Matthews 1983).

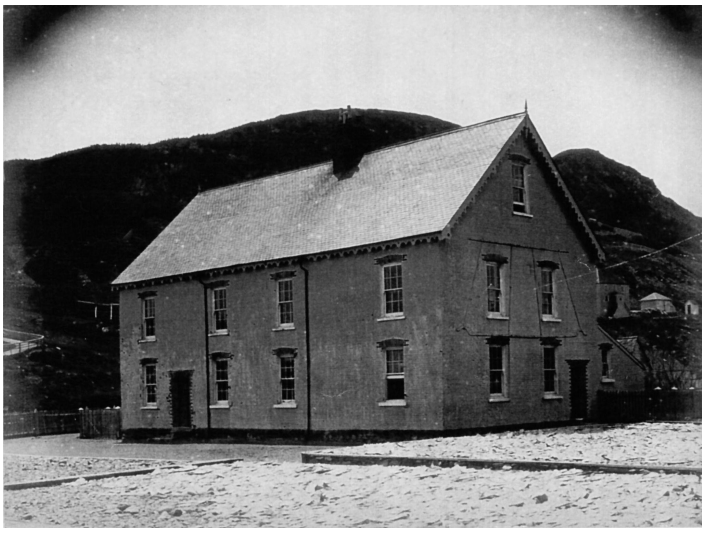


Figure 1: Newman and Company store and office building in Harbour Breton, date unknown. Image courtesy of Doug Wells.

In 1812, the company had moved its main Newfoundland office (referred to as House) from St. John's to Harbour Breton on the south coast (Matthews 1983; Figure 1). By the mid-nineteenth century, the company had their headquarters located in London, and offices throughout Newfoundland in St. John's, on the Burin Peninsula, and on the south coast, such as Gaultois, Burgeo, and the successful Harbour Breton plantation (Figure 2; Mews 1958:75; Chang 1974; MacDonald 1989: 144).



Figure 2: Newman and Company plantation in Harbour Breton circa 1899. Image courtesy of Doug Wells.

The company's location in St. John's is of particular interest for several reasons. The Newman Premises, located on the waterfront of the west end of St. John's Harbour, consisted of wharves and extensive infrastructure, as shown on several maps. The operation here had a large brick wine vault and warehouse located on Water Street and a building on the corner of Water Street and Springdale Street, known as the "Newman Building" (Figure 3). The vaults were used to store port wines to age them before importing them elsewhere. The exact year of the wine vault's construction is unknown; however, it is one of the oldest buildings in the west end of St. John's, having survived a fire in 1846 that left a large portion of the west end devastated (Innes 1986:35). The premises in St. John's also has two of its large buildings still standing, the wine vaults and the Newman Building.

Newman and Company continued their trading and bartering business for the remainder of the century, storing port wines at their offices and catching Newfoundland cod fish. In 1907, the company retired their fishing business in Newfoundland and began to sell off their properties located throughout the island (Hunt et al. 1951:21). The Newman and Co. properties on the south coast were the first to go, including the Harbour Breton

plantation which was sold to Job & Brothers, then to Coady's Limited, before the plantation was eventually demolished in 1984 (Mews 1958:78). All of the port wines that were at the offices maturing were transferred to St. John's and stored in the wine vaults at the Newman Premises (Mews 1958:78). Newman and Co. continued to be active in the business of shipping and trading port wines.

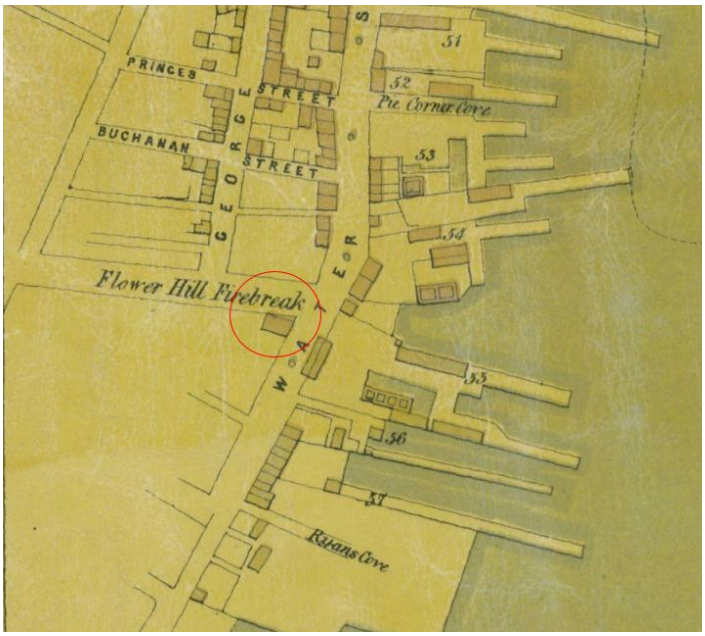


Figure 3: Infrastructure on the Newman Premises in St. John's Harbour (Page 1856).[1]

The years of the Great War and Second World War were dangerous both physically and economically due to the uncertain nature of sailing and shipping in international waters during these periods of global conflict. This had a great impact on Newman and Co. and other mercantile firms who operated in the same business. There are many instances where shipments of port wines were lost, stolen, or destroyed at sea (Hunt et al. 1951:21). During the Second World War, warfare also threatened many European countries that supplied port wines, like Portugal, and London where the head offices were located.

The Newman Building

The first reference to the Newman Building on the St. John's premises is a letter dated to 1843 revealing plans to construct a new building on the premises "on the water (south) side of the street (Water Street)" (Bill et al. 1974:24). A floor plan dated 1845 shows a building of similar portions to the present-day building (Figure 4).

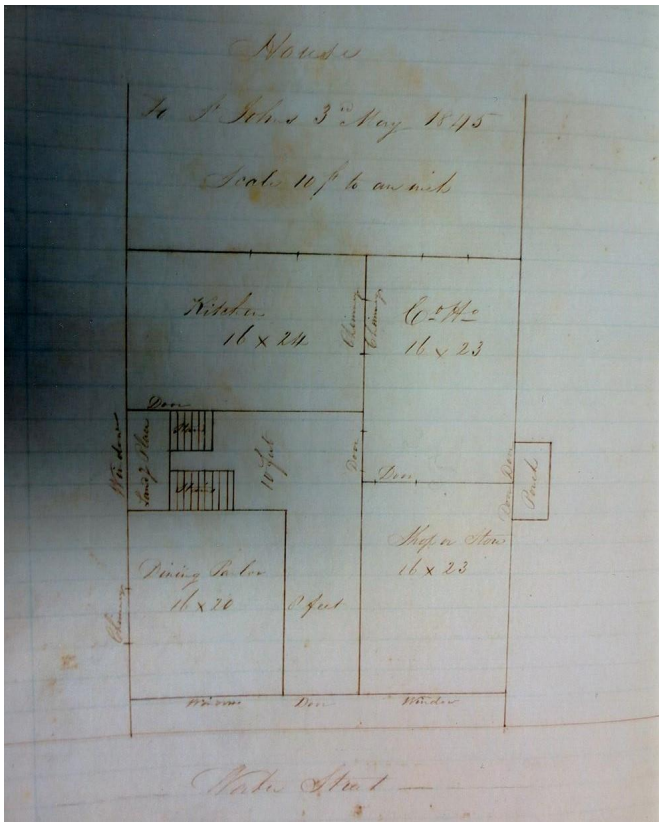


Figure 4: Drawing from 3rd May 1845 showing proposed layout of the Newman House on the corner of Water Street and Springdale Street. From Heritage NL's collection.

All plans to build any new infrastructure on the premises were halted in 1846 after a fire

[1] Springdale Street is referred to as "Flower Hill Fire Break" on some historic maps because the buildings on the corner (The Newman Building and Wine Vaults) were strategically constructed of brick and stone in efforts to prevent disastrous fires from spreading beyond the block they were located on by 'breaking' the path of the fire (Bill et al. 1974:27).

Circled in red is a building on the corner of Springdale and Water Street, likely depicting the Newman Building. Other infrastructure on the premises owned by Newman and Co. are labeled with 54 and 55.

tore through much of the west end of the city (Bill et al. 1974:24). Although the Newman's premises in St. John's had escaped the damage of the fire, the original plans to construct the House were scrapped as per Newman and Co. agent Mr. Morey's request. Morey (also referred to as Mr. Morry) proposed to change plans to construct this new building on the northside of Water Street with its back to the wine cellar vaults (Bill et al. 1974:25).

The plans to build the building at this location were drawn up a year later in 1847 and the construction is believed to have begun the following year in 1848 (Ball 1998:86; Bill et al. 1974:21,22). It is believed that a prominent St. John's architect, likely either James Purcell, Patrick Kough, or Gilbert Browning, was hired to create and construct this west end "wonder" (Bill et al. 1974:21,22). It is probable that construction was completed by the following year as a letter dated to February 1849 revealed that the construction had cost more than originally expected and that the company would need to find ways to repay these unexpected costs (Bill et al. 1974:26).

The Newman Building is a plain two-and-a half storey "Georgian" style building originally constructed of brick walls and a slate roof; it was said to be the "wonder building of the West End when it was first built" (Bill et al. 1974:21; Figure 5). The building featured a symmetrical facade with five bay openings and a steeply pitched gable roof with a singular chimney at the ridge (Heritage NL 2022). Originally, the upper floors of the building were used as residence areas while the lower floor was an office space for company agents. Later alterations were made to the building which included adding an exterior staircase (Figure 6) to the side of the building, adding concrete over some of the exterior brick, and interior improvements such as bathrooms, indoor heating and wiring (Bill et al. 1974:27; Innes 1986).



Figure 5: The Newman Building in the 1980s prior to renovations.[2]

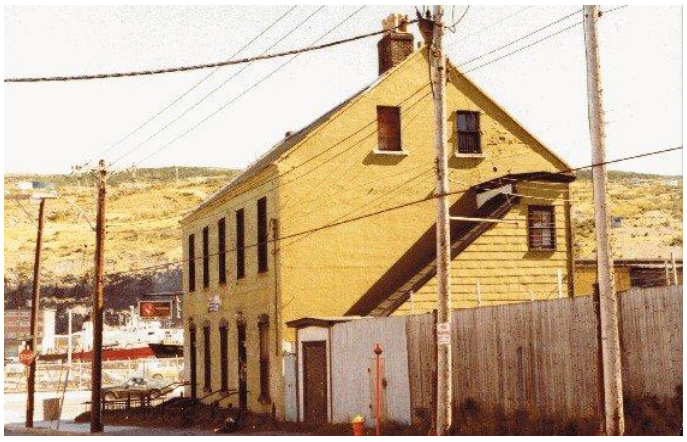


Figure 6: The Newman Building featuring the exterior staircase addition. Photographed by Florence Murrin.

The Newman Building has had many tenants since its mid-nineteenth century construction. The first was company agent Mr. Morey who resided there after the construction was complete until 1882 (Ball 1998:86; Innes 1986; Bill et al. 1974:22). Following the end of Mr. Morey's residency in the Newman Building, Lewis Tessier was the next tenant, moving in the same year (Ball 1998). Originally from England, Tessier was a local St. John's merchant who operated a successful supply and export firm with his

[2] Photographed by Newfoundland and Labrador Provincial Historic Sites, https://collections.mun.ca/digital/collection/ich_avalon/id/4466/rec/2.

brother Peter, and was also a member of the House of Assembly for several years (Benson 1998; Bill et al. 1974:22). In 1892, Tessier relocated and Henry E. Hayward took up residency in the building for the next two years. Hayward, a local retailer of spirits and wines, established Hayward & Company, which he operated out of 73 Water Street. When Hayward vacated the Newman Building, it quickly became the headquarters of the West End Club, who occupied the building from 1894-1900 (The Evening Telegram 1923). Little information is available about the West End Club. It is also understood that "The Peoples Club" were also residing in the Newman Building beginning in 1893 until 1914, as indicated on archived insurance maps (Figure 7).

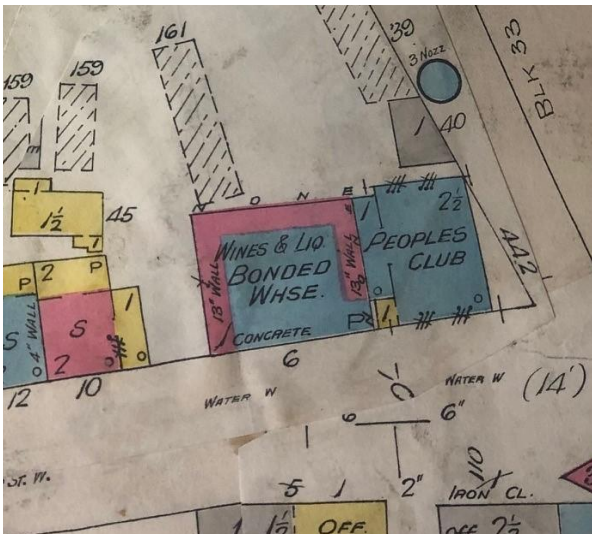
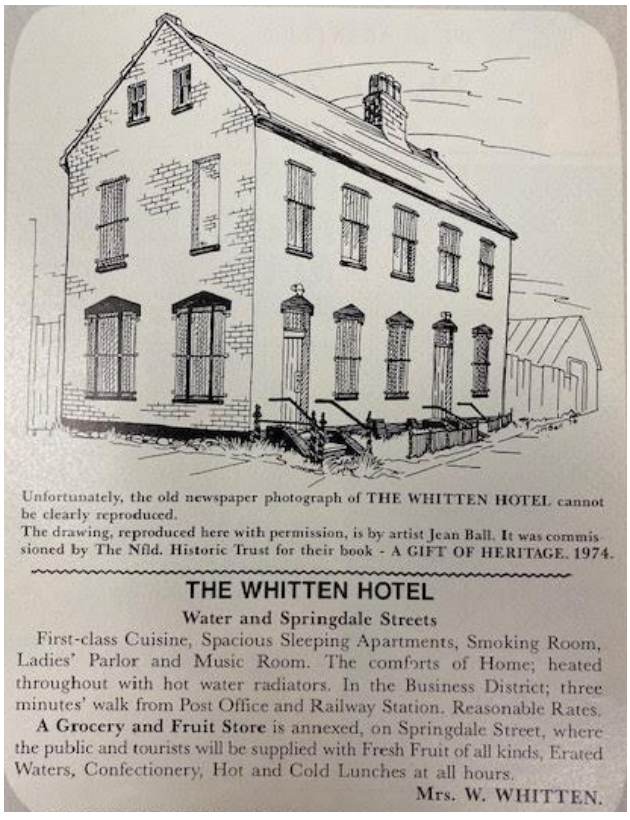


Figure 7: City of St. John's 1893 insurance plans for the Newman Building, shown on the corner of Water and Springdale Streets. Image courtesy of Alanna Wicks.

Following the West End Club's departure from the building in 1900, the Newman Building was used as the location of the Whitten (or Whitton) Hotel. It is unclear exactly when the hotel took up occupancy in the Newman Building. A 1904 newspaper advertisement details the hotel as offering apartment style rooms and other amenities (Figure 8). It is also unclear when the Whitten Hotel left the property. Only one reference to the hotel's occupancy of the Newman Building was found suggesting an end date of 1908 (Innes 1986:36). It is believed that Baine Johnston and Co. were the next tenants of the building after they were appointed as the port wine and property agents for Newman and Co., following the company's departure from the fishery in Newfoundland (Innes 1986:36). The length of Baine Johnson and Co. residency of the Newman Building is not known however. A 1914 insurance map shows the Newman Building as the home of the "Peoples Club," and by 1915, the Newman Building had new tenants, serving as the office for "The Plaindealer," a publisher-printing company (Bill et al. 1974:22). Joseph R. Smallwood was briefly employed here as a printing apprentice in 1915 (Benson 1998).


Unfortunately, the old newspaper photograph of THE WHITTEN HOTEL cannot be clearly reproduced.
The drawing, reproduced here with permission, is by artist Jean Ball. It was commissioned by The Nfld. Historic Trust for their book - A GIFT OF HERITAGE. 1974.

THE WHITTEN HOTEL
Water and Springdale Streets

First-class Cuisine, Spacious Sleeping Apartments, Smoking Room, Ladies' Parlor and Music Room. The comforts of Home; heated throughout with hot water radiators. In the Business District; three minutes' walk from Post Office and Railway Station. Reasonable Rates.

A Grocery and Fruit Store is annexed, on Springdale Street, where the public and tourists will be supplied with Fresh Fruit of all kinds, Erated Waters, Confectionery, Hot and Cold Lunches at all hours.

Mrs. W. WHITTEN.

Figure 8: Drawing of The Newman Building by Jean Ball, with reproduction of a 1904 newspaper advertisement of the Whitten Hotel (Innes 1986:35).

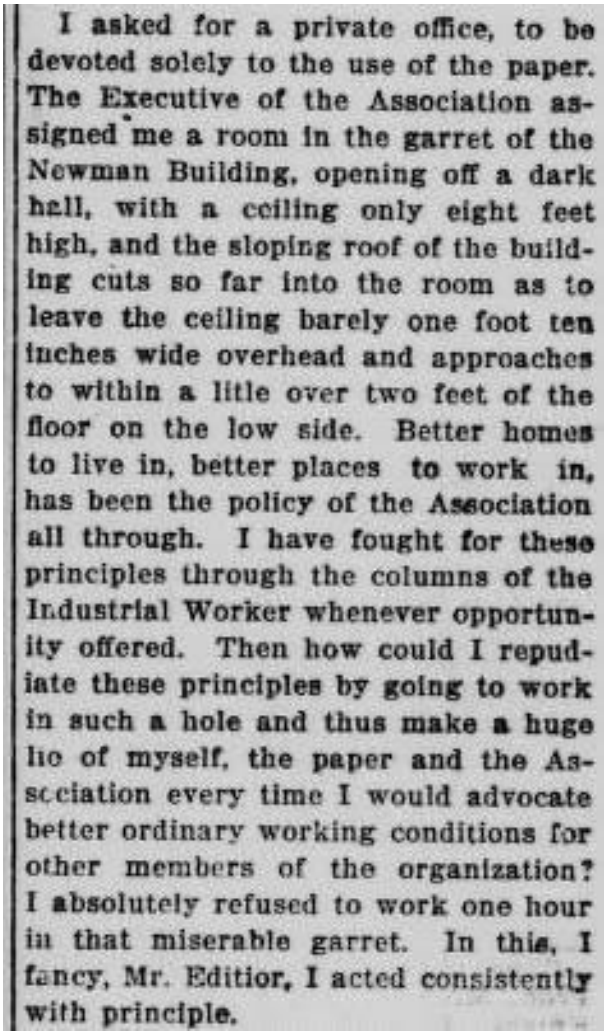
For a time around 1919, the third floor of the Newman Building was home to "The Industrial Worker," a newspaper produced by

the Newfoundland Industrial Workers Association starting in May of 1918. The May 8, 1919 issue of the Evening Telegram included a letter from Mr. Michael J. James, who had been editor of The Industrial Worker but resigned because his employer would not meet his demands. He was particularly insulted by the location of his office - a "miserable garret" on the 3rd floor of the Newman Building (Figure 9).

The Plaindealer relocated in 1921 and the Newman Building was then used as a liquor store by the Board of Liquor for several decades until the 1950s (Barakat 1973). The next reference to tenants of the Newman Building were the “Newfoundland and Labrador Press Club” who used the building in 1969 until 1976 (Benson 1998). The club was open to individuals who were employed in media careers such as newspaper, television, and radio.

After having fallen into a state of despair and being slated for demolition, the Newman Building was purchased by the Provincial Government of Newfoundland and Labrador in the early 1980s in order to save this heritage structure. Soon after, the building faced an extensive restoration to its interior and exterior after being slightly modified by many tenants over the years. Innes (1986:36) said that a group of architects would be overseeing a series of changes that “will include centering the front (Springdale St.) door rather than retaining the present doors at either side, relocating windows and rebuilding a second chimney.” They also intended to restore the exterior of the building to its brick facade, as seen in Figure 8, prior to the addition of cement on the exterior. The image also depicts with accuracy the exterior locations of the two doors and windows of the building prior to these mentioned renovations.

The Newman Building was successfully saved from its demise and did undergo many



I asked for a private office, to be devoted solely to the use of the paper. The Executive of the Association assigned me a room in the garret of the Newman Building, opening off a dark hall, with a ceiling only eight feet high, and the sloping roof of the building cuts so far into the room as to leave the ceiling barely one foot ten inches wide overhead and approaches to within a litle over two feet of the floor on the low side. Better homes to live in, better places to work in, has been the policy of the Association all through. I have fought for these principles through the columns of the Industrial Worker whenever opportunity offered. Then how could I repudiate these principles by going to work in such a hole and thus make a huge lie of myself, the paper and the Association every time I would advocate better ordinary working conditions for other members of the organization? I absolutely refused to work one hour in that miserable garret. In this, I fancy, Mr. Editior, I acted consistently with principle.

Figure 9: Excerpt from Michael J. James’ May 8, 1919 letter to the editor of The Evening Telegram.

renovations (Figure 10). As architects planned, the front of the building which faces Springdale Street was renovated to feature one central door and the exterior features a small portion of wrought iron posts and railings that are understood to be original materials used with the prior two doors. The use of the Newman Building has also changed greatly from the time of its original construction. It is no longer used as a multipurpose residency and mercantile-business dwelling, instead it is a commercial office building. A primary renovation was changing the interior after the entrances to the building were changed. Now, one central staircase extends up all storeys of the building with several renovated

office spaces on both sides of the staircase on each storey.



Figure 10: The Newman Building after renovations (Heritage NL 2022).

The basement of the Newman Building still features the original compacted organic flooring, brick and stone walls and an archway which had once led to the exterior of the building to a small, open space below the Springdale Street level (known as an areaway), however the entrance has been filled in and covered with brick and stone (Figure 11).



Figure 11: The filled in opening leading to Springdale Street in the basement of the Newman Building. Image Courtesy of Terra Barrett.

Today, the Newman Building is still owned by the provincial government and has since been designated as a municipal heritage site by the City of St. John's. Its most recent tenants since renovations were completed are the offices of the Arts Council of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, who still use the building as office space (Heritage NL 2022).

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