



Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland & Labrador

OCCASIONAL PAPER ON INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE
No. 003 — APR 2013

Exploring Our Roots: A Heritage Inventory of Newfoundland's Root Cellars

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In Newfoundland and Labrador our heritage is commonly defined by our ties to the sea and fisheries, often overlooking agricultural traditions that have also been an integral component of our cultural landscapes for generations. Vegetable gardens and small-scale farms were necessary to support year round settlement from the arrival of the earliest Europeans, and worked to complement the fisheries as the primary industry.

In 2011, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL) hosted the agricultural-themed folklife festival, *Seeds to Supper*, to celebrate farming and gardening traditions in the province. To complement these celebrations, an architectural inventory of over 150 root cellars was conducted and has been added to Memorial University's Digital Archives Initiative (DAI).

As the HFNL folklore researcher, hired through MUN's Division of Co-operative Education, I spent my summer traipsing and trudging around the Avalon to find what remained of root cellars. In collaboration with Julie Pomeroy of the Agricultural History Society (AHS), we collected photos, measurements, GPS coordinates and other information for over 100 cellars. Additionally, 45 cellars were documented first-hand in Twillingate during one week of fieldwork in the fall, where I was also fortunate to meet Twillingate resident Otto Sansome. In 2008, Otto photographed every root cellar that could be found remaining in the community – all 232 of them – and generously donated a digital copy of this collection to the DAI.

What is a Root Cellar?

During my research I found that people were often puzzled by my work. Those familiar with root cellars were puzzled by why I would be interested in such a topic, commonly reacting as if I was asking them about their refrigerator - which in a sense I was. For others, especially for those that did not grow up in outport Newfoundland, the puzzled look was often followed by the question, "What's a root cellar?" This was also my first question.

From the outside, root cellars can often seem romantic and magical. Growing up in the Greater-Toronto-Area, I did not see many root cellars in my daily life. To me, these curious little doors in the hillsides looked like some sort of fairy dwelling. For those not familiar with these structures, it's easy to imagine the mythical places that might be found on the other side of those doors. So what is on the other side?

Potatoes. And of course, carrots, turnip, cabbage, parsnips, and beets. If you're lucky you might also find a bottle of moonshine – but that's another story.

A root cellar is an underground or partially underground structure that is used to preserve vegetables and protect them from frost through the winter. Generally, they are constructed by digging a hole in the earth and reinforcing with wood, rock, cement, and/or other material before covering with sod, leaving a small door for access. Filled at harvest in the fall, the cellar would be accessed every week or two, often a chore assigned to children, to bring in vegetables to the house.

When used for the storage of vegetables, the interior of the cellar was commonly divided into wooden compartments called pounds (fig. 1). Those I spoke with described storing potatoes in the pounds, either directly on the ground, on raised wood, or in bins, keeping separate varieties in separate sections. Turnips were also stored in this fashion. Carrots and parsnip were often kept in bins or buckets filled with sand or sawdust which kept them moist and firm. Cabbage, when it was stored in the cellar, was kept up high and often described as being hung from above. Some individuals also reported storing jams, jellies, milk and other perishable items in the cellar to keep cool during the warm summer months.

Architectural Survey

The landscape available is one of the key elements in determining where the root cellar will be located and the form it will ultimately take. Where possible, root cellars are constructed into natural hillsides and make use of the existing geography in the structure of the cellar. Constructing the foundation of the cellar on a hillside allows for the natural landscape to act as a retaining wall for the surrounding earth. Ideally, this earth will be no less than fifty centimetres (approximately two feet) thick, which is necessary to achieve proper temperature and humidity levels. Where possible, the root cellar will be constructed between the fields where the crops are grown, and the house where they will eventually be prepared and consumed. Consideration will also be given to other factors, such as the locations of large rocks or boulders, groundwater, or areas of snow accumulation.

There are two basic designs for cellar foundations: the double door ground level entrance and the hatched entrance.





In the double door ground level entrance, a small porch separates the exterior door from the interior door (fig. 2). Designed to keep frost out, the exterior door is closed before opening the interior door to access the cellar. Hatched entrance cellars are similar in size and interior arrangement but are entered from above, most commonly through a hatch located in floor of a shed constructed on top of the foundation (fig. 3). While lacking the porch component, the intermediate space of the shed creates a frost barrier between the cellar and outdoors. In the less common example where there is no shed, an exterior cover was placed over an interior hinged hatch, leaving a gap between the cellar interior and the outdoors.

Traditionally, dry-stacked rocks or wooden slabs would have been used to create a structure to support the earth mound (fig. 4). While there is little evidence remaining of cellars constructed with wood, foundations made of stone and mortar or dry stack rocks later upgraded with cement or concrete were common in this study. In Twillingate concrete cellars were most prevalent (fig. 5), replacing wooden slabs as the primary building material in the area by 1930.

Ultimately, cellar design and construction was a matter of material available. For this reason, every cellar is unique as each was built with the resources at hand. Repurposing old material was common practice as builders and maintainers salvaged everything from plastic or metal siding to old railway ties, guard rails, and telephone wires (fig. 6-8).

From the research collected by myself and Julie Pomeroy, with additional evidence from a report conducted by Tourism Elliston and Otto Sansome's photo collection, five primary types of traditional root cellars can be identified in Newfoundland & Labrador:

The first type is the hatched entrance with shed (fig. 9-11). In this type prevalent in the Avalon region, the cellar foundation may be varying degrees below ground-level and is entered from the top through a hatch located in the floor of the shed constructed on top of the foundation. Style of shed is variable, with certain areas showing favour to particular designs. In some cases, the cellar is entered by removing unfastened floorboards instead of through a dedicated hatch.

The second type is the hatched entrance without shed and was the least common type encountered in this study (fig. 12). Only one cellar fitting this type was documented first hand in Twillingate, and one more is known to exist in the area as represented in Otto Sansome's collection. In this type, the cellar is also entered from above, but the hatched entrance is accessed directly from outside.

The double-door ground-level entrance with top house has been identified as the third type (fig. 13). Entrance to this type of cellar is gained through exterior and interior doors separated by a porch, which functions as a barrier to keep frost out. Access to the top house, if available, is through a hatch located in the cellar, but there is no access to this wooden structure from the exterior.

The fourth type identified is the dual-entrance cellar, which can be entered either through the double-door ground-level entrance or through a hatch located in the floor of the shed constructed on top (fig. 14). The dual-entrance was not common in this survey, with only two encountered in the Avalon region.

Lastly, the fifth type is the double-door ground-level entrance without a wooden structure on top (fig. 15). This was the primary type encountered in the Twillingate area where it was found to be constructed above ground with the earth mound built up around the foundation, accessed through a ground-level entrance.

Returning to our Roots for a Sustainable Future

Presently, root cellars throughout the province can be found in a range of conditions, from those in varying degrees of collapse and decay (fig. 16), those that have been maintained and used continuously for multiple generations (fig. 17), to others that have been repurposed, restored, or reconstructed (fig. 18).

As interest in food security grows, root cellars have taken on new meaning to some Newfoundlanders as symbols of a healthy and sustainable lifestyle. The Food Security Network of Newfoundland and Labrador (FSN) promotes root cellaring as a means to increasing food self-sufficiency in the province. Their blog, Root Cellars Rock, supports local food consumption and production by focusing on “The Four Ps”: planting, picking, preparing, and preserving. As a food storage option, root cellars represent a number of potential gains for sustainability movements. In addition to the absence of energy consumption, they also provide opportunities for growing and storing one’s own vegetables or allow individuals to purchase produce in bulk, from a local source, thus minimizing packaging and reducing greenhouse gas emissions associated with transportation.

The root cellars that can still be found tucked into the hillsides throughout the province stand as reminders of the agricultural practices that were once so prevalent on the island. As tangible anchors to practices and values of past generations, root cellars teach us the value of simplicity and represent the potential for a sustainable future.

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Our Mission

The Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL) was established in 1984 to promote, preserve and protect the built heritage of the province. In 2008, HFNL was chosen to be the agency that would implement the province’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Strategy. Our mission is to safeguard and sustain the intangible cultural heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador for present and future generations everywhere, as a vital part of the identities of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and as a valuable collection of unique knowledge and customs.