



# Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland & Labrador

OCCASIONAL PAPER ON INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE  
No. 005 — MAR 2014

## Folklore of Wells in Newfoundland

SARAH INGRAM

Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador  
St. John's, Newfoundland, CANADA

This report is a summary of research conducted on wells, springs and natural water sources in St. John's and surrounding area. It covers associated knowledge of springs, well, water diviners, spouts, wishing wells, traditional knowledge about water purity and cleanliness, techniques to prevent fouling of water sources, and traditional values around water resources. This project was conducted from July to October of 2013 in partnership with the Memorial University Folklore department, the HFNL ICH office, the Harris Centre and the RBC Drinking Water and Outreach Fund.

Over 60 wells and springs were visited and documented; many different people were consulted and talked to about traditions, while a dozen were formally interviewed. This paper outlines the more popular and longstanding traditions surrounding both natural and dug water sources throughout various communities in Eastern Newfoundland. While some seem to be traditions that stem from roots in Britain, and carry many similar characteristics, some seem to be more locally and organically generated within communities over the last several centuries. By analyzing the different traditions surrounding water sources in various communities, how they vary and are similar to each other, we can ascertain an understanding of their importance to family, daily and spiritual life, as well as community and practical use.

Water is a necessity for daily living, and so traditions surrounding reliable sources of clean, uncontaminated drinking water are abundant. These ranged from being able to identify the best sources of water, to how to find a new water source, to determining which family members were responsible for collecting water, and the different ways to keep water sources clean and protected. This could mean deciding to build a new home next to a natural spring while colonizing a new land, or having a professional company come onto a newly acquired property to drill a modern artesian well. Through travelling to communities and interviewing those who have wells and remember them, I collected many different memories and variations of traditions that surround different aspects of finding water, protecting water, and respecting water.

**Figure 01:** Kenneth Williams demonstrating how he dowses for water at his home in Bay Bulls, Newfoundland.  
**Figure 02:** A shot down the 80 year old well on Jessica Cahill's property in Ocean Pond, Newfoundland.



Some of the most interesting fieldwork revolved around dowsing. Dowzers, also called “water witches,” are people who hold the ability to locate objects with a forked stick or metal instrument, which responds to the element the dowser is looking for. In Europe dowsing is a technique used both to find water as well as – for some people – “ley lines,” which are said to be the trackways that align ancient megaliths and monuments with natural formations.<sup>1</sup>

The dowzers spoken to over this project were specifically water witches, which is the most popular form of dowser in North America. Kenneth Williams of Bay Bulls learned he had the talent to find water accidentally over 30 years ago (Figure 1). When getting someone to find water on his property, he learned “just by another feller doing it showing me how it was done, and I just picked up a stick and did it.”<sup>2</sup>

The method is simple: the instrument is held in the hands as the dowser walks along the property; when water is below, the instrument reacts. Different materials react in different ways. Wooden ‘Y’ shapes, traditionally cut from dogwood trees in most cases, are said to turn towards the ground over the places water can be found. More recently metal rods have been used; bent into ‘L’ shapes, they are held loosely in the hands. Tony Dunn of Renews is able to find water with wires, and demonstrated how it worked.

“Get two wires, and bend them in a shape of an L, and keep your arms open ... and as you get handier to the water, the water line, or a V in the water or whatever, your wire will close; you’ll see them close ... and right where they crosses, that’s where your water [will be].”<sup>3</sup> When asked about the accuracy of dowsing, Williams said with a laugh, “if you dig deep enough [anywhere], you’ll eventually find water.”<sup>4</sup>

The name of a person skilled in water dowsing is passed around by word of mouth in a community, and when someone needs to dig a well they would be there to assist them in finding the perfect spot. Water witches rarely expect payment, and do not accept money, but are usually offered something in return for their services anyway. Traditionally this is either food or an exchange for another service. “You wouldn’t get no money out of it no, you wouldn’t charge somebody ... sometimes we ‘found’ beer.”<sup>5</sup>

Once water was found and the well was dug, it needed to be brought into the house. Before the days of interior



**Figure 03:** A woman carrying water with hoops, 1930. Rooms VA 110-28.7. **Figure 04:** A communal well on the Hawkins property in Cape Broyle, Newfoundland. This well provides water for three different homes in the area, each with their own intake piping. **Figure 05:** A spring along the Holyrood access road warning potential drinkers.



plumbing and piping, water was carried by buckets into the house for daily use by the family (Figure 2). Many of the people interviewed recalled being sent to get buckets of water from the well or spring, sometimes taking turns among siblings, and sometimes being forced to do it because they were the youngest or the strongest. Dot O'Brien of Cape Broyle remembers that her and her siblings "used to take turns to go to the well."<sup>6</sup> Her husband Andrew remembers water needing to be carried: "I've seen lots of people bringing water, that was a common thing for people, with two buckets usually."<sup>7</sup> Gus James of St. John's also had memories of his family bringing in water:

We always went to the tank which was probably 20-30 feet from the house, and we would go out there and get the water in buckets and bring it in, and you would always have these four or five galvanized buckets full of water. I didn't carry a lot of water, I was probably too young and too small, but my brother and my sisters did. They would go out to the tank and fill up the buckets and [bring them] in.<sup>8</sup>

Wooden hoops helped to spread the weight equally around the body, allowing people to carry more buckets of water at a time with less strain (Figure 3). Dot O'Brien told me hoops were used so "they didn't slop the water down their legs, because that often happened."<sup>9</sup>

Some families were lucky enough to have a water source so close to the house that it was incorporated into the basement, cellar or porch. When this was the case, a hatch could be placed in the floorboards to allow access to the water.

My Aunt Nell's house had a well inside, under her floor, and she had a hatch ... as soon as you walked in the front porch [with a] mat over the hatch, and you used to lift it up [to get water] ... and this was her well, because when she bought the house, that's where the well was, inside ... they all thought that was marvelous, that you didn't need to go outside to get your water.<sup>10</sup>

As soon as piping could be directly attached from wells to the taps in your house, the tradition of fetching water in various ways fell to the wayside (Figure 4). Well water could be directly accessed, and interaction with the wells became more focused on maintenance.



Figure 06: The interior of Tony Dunn's well in Renewes, Newfoundland, a well hand dug in 2009 by Dunn, found via wire dowsing.  
 Figure 07: A spring sign knocked down after the path to the shore became unsafe in Renewes, Newfoundland.



It was important to keep wells cleaned and maintained. Pipes had a tendency to clog, and without a proper cleaning at least every few years, the family ran the risk of drinking contaminated water. There are several well-cleaning traditions that have been used around Eastern Newfoundland (Figure 5). A common cleaning method passed down through families was cleaning wells by hand, using either lime, or more recently Javex, as the cleansers. Edgar Spurrell of Portugal Cove-St. Philip's noted that "Javex was as good as anything for killing germs."<sup>11</sup> Laurie Legrow, who lives on a property with three functioning wells in Makinsons, explained in detail how she takes care of the main well that serves her house:

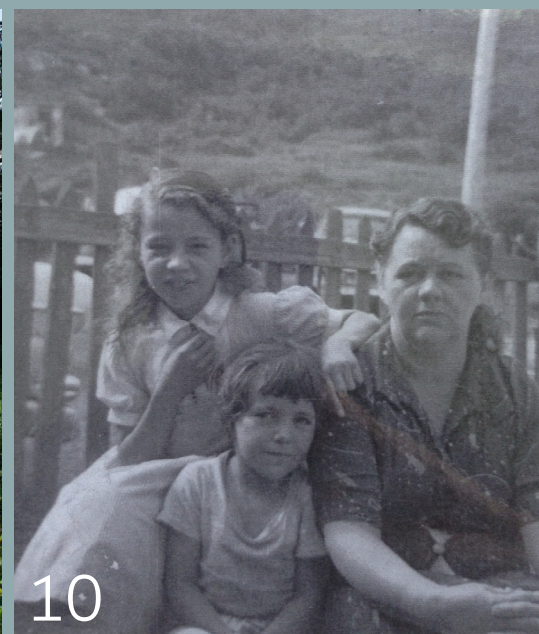
"We pumped all the water out of [the well] ... then when we got down to the bottom we bailed it out. We scraped out all the sediment, put it in buckets ... my partner was down in the well doing all that, handing me the buckets, [and] I'd come out and dump them. Once we had the well emptied of water you have to work fast because the water obviously keeps wanting to come back in. You then take a bleach solution and then rinse it out ... once you let the water start building up again put a bit of bleach in that, and then run your water in your house, just in case if any algae or anything was building up inside the pipes, it would be cleaned up."<sup>12</sup>

Another traditional method to keeping the well clean throughout the year and between cleanings was keeping a live trout in the well. Almost every well owner and spring informant remembered that they either used to have a trout in their well, or knew of someone who did (Figure 6). The folklore surrounding trout in wells is not exclusive to Newfoundland; stories of trout, fish and eels being put inside wells to eat sediment and parasites in the water can be found outside the province. Edgar Spurrell said that "they eat up all the bugs that go in the well", so he "caught a little trout ... took him, put him down the well; he grew [almost double the length] and he was too big for the well."<sup>13</sup> Kenny Williams said that the trout would last "a few years, though some would survive a while ... then you'd eat the trout."<sup>14</sup>

Edward Mahoney of Colliers had an interesting trout tale: "One of the guys had a few drinks into him and decided he wanted a nice meal of trout, went out and caught the trout out of the well and fried her up for supper. My mom wasn't very happy about it ... and they never replaced the trout."<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 8:** A stop sign covered spring well in Cupids, Newfoundland. This well is over 100 years old, and was once thought to be the water source for the settlement of John Guy. **Figure 9:** The covered plantation well in Cupids, Newfoundland. It was sealed before it could be excavated, so what was left behind from its original use is possibly still *in situ*. **Figure 10:** Shirley Holden and her family gather on their well for a photo in the early 1960's.



Almost universally, people reported that spring and well water was preferable to municipal tap water, due to the clear taste and the cold temperatures, even in the hot summertime (Figure 7). Several people interviewed, including Jim Foley, Tony Dunn and Al Roche, all from Renews, insisted I taste their well water so I could see for myself that it tasted the purest, and to show me how the water would quickly frost their taps. Edward Mahoney called his well water “absolutely beautiful,” and Jim Foley claimed that “there’s no comparison whatsoever [to tap water] ... it’s 100% better.”<sup>16</sup>

According to Provincial Government census and surveys, only 17.8% of Newfoundlanders are not connected to public water supplies.<sup>17</sup> However, based on interviews and personal surveying it is likely a much higher percentage of people in rural communities who use well and spring water over tap water. Those who rely on independent water sources (that is, their own wells and spring sources) typically also prefer it over their tap water. Many purposely go out of their way to collect spring water to use in lieu of municipal water. This is in part because of the taste, and in part because many communities are hit with frequent boil orders (Figure 8).

Folklore surrounding wells and springs often focuses on community interaction and protection. Public and communal water sources often provided an unofficial meeting place. Before indoor plumbing provided water acquisition, women would informally meet in the mornings to gather water and take the time to chat and gossip; children after school would plan to meet at the well to plan their afternoon activities. A public well could represent a starting place for a parade, or a casual meeting area for a group or event (Figure 9).

Dot O’Brien called the community or public well “a gathering place,”<sup>18</sup> and Shirley Holden told me “wells were meeting spots.”<sup>19</sup> Gus James grew up around Signal Hill, and remembers the public well being a place to chat: “For the housewives, it was a bit of a gathering spot in the mornings, because they would go ... and they’d get their bucket of water and chat for five minutes, and then they’d go on home.”<sup>20</sup>

A tradition arose of having family and group photos taken on a well around holidays. Shirley Holden grew up in Shea Heights, where she still lives, and remembers always gathering to take photos on the well for anything special:



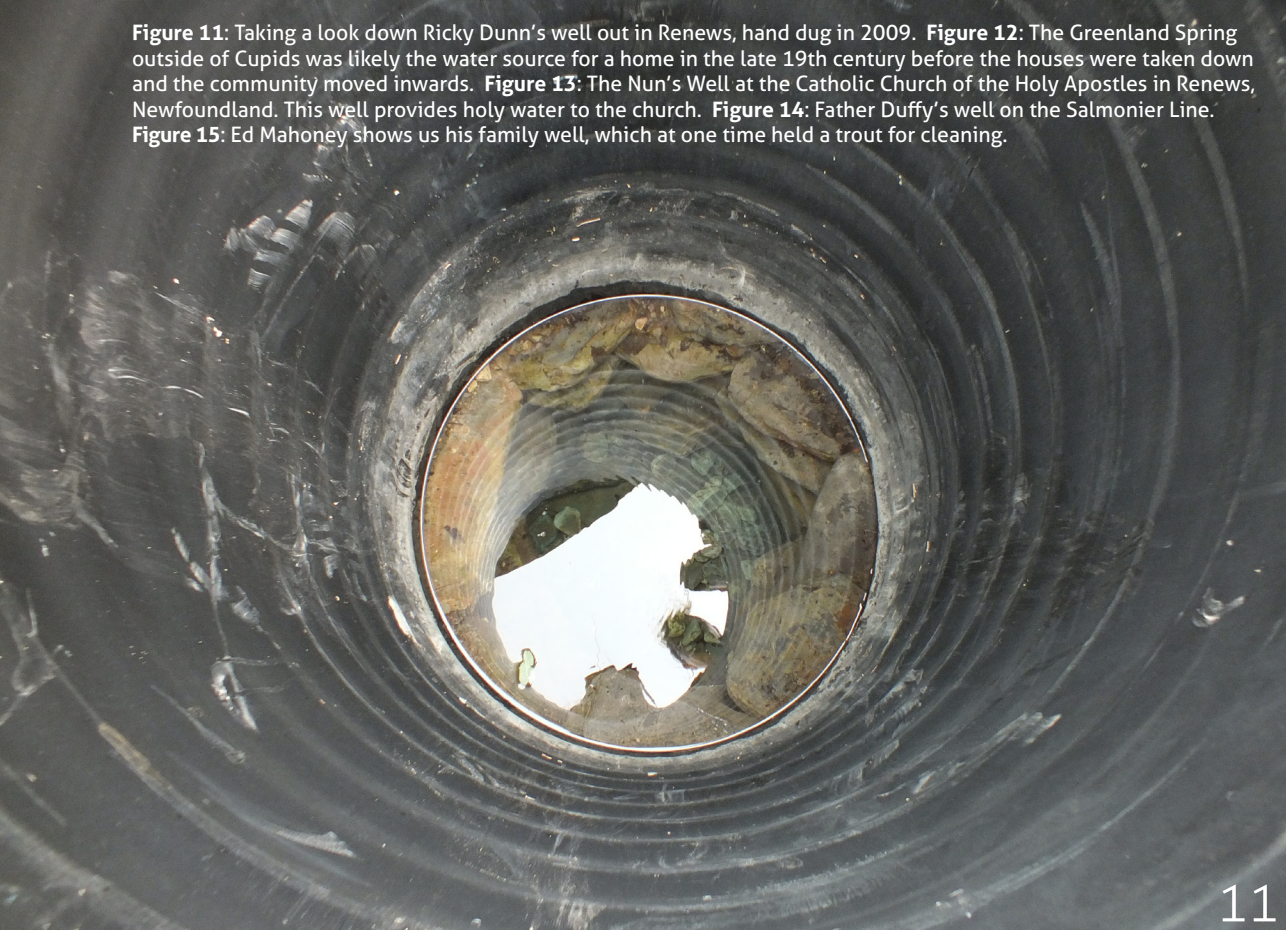
birthdays, Easter, or even Christmas, especially outside of the Vicker's general store window on their well out front of the property (Figure 10). "They put all the decorations and the lights and the little houses [in the window] and so that was your big background; everybody would go and sit on the Vickers well and get their picture taken ... and it wasn't only us, it was a lot of people that went and sat on the well and got their pictures taken."<sup>21</sup>

Keeping public water sources safe was up to the community. If a child was hurt or killed in or around a well, the community often sealed it to prevent any future accidents. "Everybody was there to help everybody else", said Shirley Holden, "that's just the way it was."<sup>22</sup>

The protection of this important resource was the responsibility of the community, not just individuals. They all seemed to have everyone's best interest at heart, and rallied around each other when issues arose (Figure 11). The residents closest to community wells would make sure children were playing safely, and shoo them away when they were being unsafe or causing trouble. Gus James remembers his grandfather being "the unofficial keep of the [community] well, because if any of the kids were out fooling with the well, or doing at all near the well, he would yell out 'get outta there!' and we would go on."<sup>23</sup>

It was also the responsibility of the community to protect the cleanliness of shared or public water sources, and to keep them clear of garbage or sediment buildup. Dot O'Brien of Cape Broyle said: "There were a lot of things in small communities that everybody in the community had respect for, and wells was one of them."<sup>24</sup> There was a strong unspoken regard for the protection, safety, and cleanliness of water sources that were used by multiple families and easily accessible by the public. Water was important to everyday life, and so the community respected water sources, and did what they could to keep them safe (Figure 12).

**Figure 11:** Taking a look down Ricky Dunn's well out in Renewes, hand dug in 2009. **Figure 12:** The Greenland Spring outside of Cupids was likely the water source for a home in the late 19th century before the houses were taken down and the community moved inwards. **Figure 13:** The Nun's Well at the Catholic Church of the Holy Apostles in Renewes, Newfoundland. This well provides holy water to the church. **Figure 14:** Father Duffy's well on the Salmonier Line. **Figure 15:** Ed Mahoney shows us his family well, which at one time held a trout for cleaning.





Holy wells, from either a pagan or Christian context, are more widespread in Europe than in North America; one of the most popular areas for holy well lore and history is the British Isles. These water sources, either wells or natural springs, have local folkloric significance, and often there are legends associated with their healing qualities.<sup>25</sup> One Newfoundland holy well is the Nun's Well at the Catholic Church of the Holy Apostles in Renew's, Newfoundland (Figure 13). This well was the source of holy water for the church after it was blessed many years ago, and a source of water for the Catholic school that once stood on the property.

Wells and springs that have religious or holy connotations typically come with an origin story. One of the most well-known legends in Newfoundland regarding water sources has a spiritual connection: Father Duffy's Well on the Salmonier Line, in the central Avalon Peninsula (Figure 14). Father Duffy was an Irish-born priest who moved to Newfoundland in 1833 as a volunteer assisting Bishop Fleming, eventually becoming a Parish priest at St. Mary's.<sup>26</sup> A spring became associated with him sometime between 1833-1880, the time from when Father Duffy arrived in Newfoundland to when he passed away. There are quite a few different interpretations of this spring, and its origin stories range from the mundane to the supernatural. The most basic of stories is that Father Duffy traveled along this road to and from St. John's, and frequently stopped to drink at this spring on his way to several court dates he needed to attend. Another more supernatural or mythological story is that the well originated from a fight between Father Duffy and an evil spirit. Father Duffy stopped along the road to rest, and while he was resting an evil spirit attacked him. They wrestled, and eventually Father Duffy overpowered the spirit and struck him to the ground. Where the spirit's head hit the ground, a spring appeared, and it has flowed since. This spot became associated with him, and eventually it became a visited place to remember him and his achievements.<sup>27</sup> In 1935 it was dedicated by the Knights of Columbus, who constructed a cement wall and grotto around the spring, commemorating it in Father Duffy's name.



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## Sources

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Spiritually significant wells do not need to be religious. One example is a wishing well, where a coin could be exchanged for a wish. There was an old wishing well in the MUN Botanical Gardens in St. John's, Newfoundland, which was actively wished in until the early 2000s when it was sealed for safety and to reduce vandalism. Wishing wells are found frequently in Europe, specifically in Wales and the British Isles; they are less popular in Newfoundland, especially along the Eastern coast.<sup>28</sup>

The Sir Richard Squires well in Bowring Park is a remnant of "Midstream," Prime Minister Richard Squires's summer residence where he built his house Cherry Lodge in 1914. Originally a wishing well, this well has become known as the Witch's Well by local residents over the years.<sup>29</sup>

Loved ones, while sick or on their death beds, might request water from a specific well or spring that held significant meaning to them (Figure 15). This was either as a drink, or in a vial so they could take it with them to the 'other side' when they were buried or cremated with it. Edward Mahoney had a similar experience: "When my mom was dying, she wanted water from her father's well ... so they got her two bottles; one bottle she drank, and the other bottle she was buried with."<sup>30</sup> Another story he heard was of a grandmother that requested water from a well she held dear from her childhood. However, it was quite a distance, and the family did not want to make the trek to the spring. Instead they brought her water from a different source. The grandmother could tell the difference and sent them back for the real thing.

Water is an important resource, and because of this there are many folklore traditions and practices surrounding its use and protection. These traditions are important reflections of the feelings surrounding the importance of water, something less and less associated with water sources now that it is readily accessible via city water and indoor plumbing. One thing clearly lost with this switch to consistent and endless water supply in urban areas is the respect and protection of water evident in small Newfoundland communities still reliant on natural water sources.

By supporting and understanding these folkways, and preserving them for future generations, these memories will be preserved and better understood. They have the potential to further enhance our understanding of small community life in Newfoundland in the past as well as the present, and how to care for our resources.

## Endnotes

- |    |   |    |  |
|----|---|----|--|
| 1  | Watkins 1922 p.46                                   | 16 | Interview with Jim Foley July 24 2013              |
| 2  | Interview with Kenneth Williams July 19 2013        | 17 | Source to Tap p.2-5 s.2.2.1 May 2001               |
| 3  | Interview with Tony Dunn July 18 2013               | 18 | Interview with Andrew and Dot O'Brien July 24 2013 |
| 4  | Interview with Kenneth Williams July 19 2013        | 19 | Interview with Shirley Holden Sept 18 2013         |
| 5  | Interview with Kenneth Williams July 19 2013        | 20 | Interview with Gus James Sept 16 2013              |
| 6  | Interview with Andrew and Dot O'Brien July 24 2013  | 21 | Interview with Shirley Holden Sept 18 2013         |
| 7  | Interview with Andrew and Dot O'Brien July 24 2013  | 22 | Interview with Shirley Holden Sept 18 2013         |
| 8  | Interview with Gus James Sept 16 2013               | 23 | Interview with Gus James Sept 16 2013              |
| 9  | Interview with Andrew and Dot O'Brien July 24 2013  | 24 | Interview with Andrew and Dot O'Brien July 24 2013 |
| 10 | Interview with Shirley Holden Sept 18 2013          | 25 | Rattue 1995 p. 4                                   |
| 11 | Interview with Edna and Edgar Spurrell Sept 11 2013 | 26 | Dale Jarvis, The Telegram, July 21 2013            |
| 12 | Interview with Laurie Legrow July 12 2013           | 27 | Rieti 1995 p. 272                                  |
| 13 | Interview with Edna and Edgar Spurrell Sept 11 2013 | 28 | Rattue 1995 p.4                                    |
| 14 | Interview with Kenneth Williams July 19 2013        | 29 | Bowring Park Foundation                            |
| 15 | Interview with Edward Mahoney July 18 2013          | 30 | Interview with Edward Mahoney July 18 2013         |