



# Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland & Labrador

OCCASIONAL PAPER No. 008 — AUG 2017

## A Social and Architectural Analysis of the Harbour Grace Railway Station

KATHERINE HARVEY

### Abstract

The Harbour Grace Railway Station (see figure 1), also known as the Gordon G. Pike Railway Heritage Museum and Park, is a rectangular, one-story building with a mid-pitch hipped roof and protruding eaves which conveniently served as shelter for those waiting for their train in the past. The station is located on one of the high points of land on Military Road in Harbour Grace, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Although the Harbour Grace Railway Station is an important landmark in the history of the Newfoundland railway, there is little written on the station. The following paper is based on archival research and oral history interviews conducted by the author.

### A Brief History of the Railway in Newfoundland

Newfoundland is a vast area, spanning 405,212 km in total. The population is sparse, as people settled in various nooks and crannies all across the island. Communities were connected either by boat, or by dirt roads and paths.

The province hoped to enter the modern age when, on August 9, 1881, the first sod was turned that began the construction of the railway. The track was built narrow gauge, meaning it measured 3'6". The railway would aid to reduce isolation, facilitate the transportation of goods, and "help to diversify the economy by making it possible to exploit the island's interior resources, especially forests and minerals" (Collier 2010).



1



2



3



4



5



6



7

**Fig. 1** Harbour Grace Railway Station (photo by Michael Philpott, 2016). • **Fig. 2** The Express Room (photo by Katherine Harvey, 2017). • **Fig. 3** The Waiting Room (photo by Katherine Harvey, 2017). • **Fig. 4** Carbonear Railway Station (photo by Andrea O'Brien, 2011). • **Fig. 5** Ticket window (photo by Katherine Harvey, 2017). • **Fig. 6** Wayne Cashin with his father's morse code transmitter and receiver (photo by Katherine Harvey, 2017). • **Fig. 7** Harbour Grace Railway Station and Freight House c. 1980 (photo by Joe McMillan).

The first line that was constructed ran from Cavendish Square, St. John's to Harbour Grace. That line reached Harbour Grace by October 4, 1884. Construction continued on the railway lines, spanning an astonishing 906 miles in its peak years. The main line ran from St. John's to Port aux Basques, which covered 548 miles (Cuff 2011). The first passenger train ran across the island in June of 1898.

After much conflict, political turmoil, and financial difficulties, the last freight train ran on June of 1988, making the operation of the railway span just a little over a century. In the twenty-first century, little evidence remains of the Newfoundland railway. The tracks have been torn up, and the paths that remain have been affectionately nicknamed the "T'railway," which is used mostly by hikers, bikers and ATV riders.

## The History of the Harbour Grace Railway Station

The station was erected in 1881 by the Reid Newfoundland Company (RNC). It was the first station, outside of St. John's, that was built in Newfoundland. Harbour Grace was once a thriving commercial hub, and so providing a connection to St. John's was essential. Conception Bay North was also the most densely populated area of the island at the time so providing that connection was necessary both for the transportation of freight and passengers.

The distinct green and gold paint reflects the well-known company colors of the RNC. According to Wayne Cashin, son of Harold Cashin, the last station agent in the community, the building was at one point a red ochre colour. Evidence remains on the faded and chipped building that this was in fact the case.

The station itself is small and inconspicuous. It is a rectangular, one-storey dwelling with an attic. The building is composed of three rooms: the express room (figure 2), the waiting room (figure 3) and the main office. Wayne Cashin explains the layout of the station, and how the rooms were used in the past:

If you're going in through the main door, that door there is where the customer would come in and either pick up their packages, or pick up their tickets for the train, if they were travelling on the train. And I guess any sort of dealings with picking up their freight or paying for their freight . . . Then you walk into the next room, and that's where the agent operated. . . all the phones were there. I don't even know if it's there now, I didn't notice, but there was a seminar switch up on top that they pulled to stop the train. Like if you had a train order, and the train had to stop because of an order, that'd be up, and if it was down you'd go on through. So that's where [dad] worked. And then the next room, on the back, was the waiting area for anyone waiting to get on the train.

This amount of rooms was fairly standard for other stations of the late nineteenth-century era. The Carbonear Station (see figure 4), which is virtually identical to the Harbour Grace Station, was "divided into three main parts, the baggage area, the office and the waiting rooms . . . originally, the two waiting rooms were one for men and the other for women" (Rolton 1988, 33).

There were two ticket windows (figure 5), one connecting the office and the middle room, and the other between the waiting room and the middle room. Wayne Cashin explains the purpose of these windows:

That's where you would serve the customer, like if there's a customer out in the waiting area and they wanted some information on the train, or sometimes they'd even go in there and buy their tickets. They'd go into the waiting area and they'd be served from over there. And then on the other side, they'd come in to that side, and then dad could serve them on that side as well . . . [it was just for] convenience."

This railway station is indicative of the late nineteenth-century style that can be seen throughout Newfoundland, as noted by Doull:

All standard-plan stations in Newfoundland were frame structures, clapboard and single-clad. Rather than displaying a prominent, distinctive design which proclaimed their function and the presence of the railway, they were planned to be inconspicuous, to blend with the local architecture. Smaller stations employed the characteristic hipped roofs and projecting eaves. All were model scale and design, reflecting their creation by an industrial line, built on a restrictive budget and serving a large area with a small scattered population (1998, 448).

Doull affirms, “the Reid structures, with the exception of the St. John’s terminus, were frame buildings – easily created by local craftsmen using mostly readily available materials” (1988, 446). Patrick Collins believes the station was built by members of the community. He explained:

At the time there would have been plenty of tradespeople in Harbour Grace because Harbour Grace was a vibrant community and there were lots of Irish and Englishmen who were great apprenticeships and tradespeople . . . I know a lot of Riverhead men worked on the railroad and Harbour Grace people . . . but who actually built the building, I’m not certain. But you would think that it would have been local people because [there were] lots of local craftsmen in the town. And there were mills and plenty of wood, so it would seem obvious that would be the best thing to do. And also politically, if you think during Whiteway’s time, all the trouble to get the railway as far as Harbour Grace, and all the political happenings of the time, it makes sense that the politicians would like to have hired local people (Collins 2017, 0:1:01).

There was a freight shed which once stood adjacent to the station. Unfortunately, it has since been demolished. Patrick Collins recalls an exciting evening working at the station:

I remember the train coming down with a load of Mary Brown’s secret recipe. Boxfuls of secret recipe dough that they use for the deep fried chicken at Mary Brown’s which is here in Harbour Grace. And I remember that being quite secretive. The owner coming up and saying, ‘make sure none of those boxes are stolen.’ There was a freight shed that was right next to the station that is gone now and that was very securely looked after (Collins 2017, 0:19:00).

Brown writes, “For many Canadians, their small-town station was a place to travel, to socialize, or to work. It symbolized their town and was their gateway to the outside” (2008, 115). The Harbour Grace Railway station provided the community with a much-needed connection to various other places in Newfoundland. Travelling was extremely difficult in the past, and the railway provided people with this luxury.

Those who remember the thriving days of the Harbour Grace Railway are dwindling in numbers. Mrs. Jenny Soper, a resident of Harbour Grace, recalls her first experience with the Harbour Grace railway:

She boarded in Harbour Grace at 8:30 a.m. on her way to Whiteway, Trinity Bay to visit with a friend. For some unforeseen reason, there was a break down at Brigus Junction. The passengers had to wait in the station until the necessary repairs were made. To compensate for the inconvenience, the passengers were served a free lunch of Corn Beef and Cabbage. Shortly thereafter, the passengers boarded the train once again, and Mrs. Soper arrived at her destination at 4:30 p.m. that day. Mrs. Soper recalled the beautiful upholstered seats and noted the courteousness of the conductor. She stated how everything seemed to be very well managed (Poitras 1996, 16).

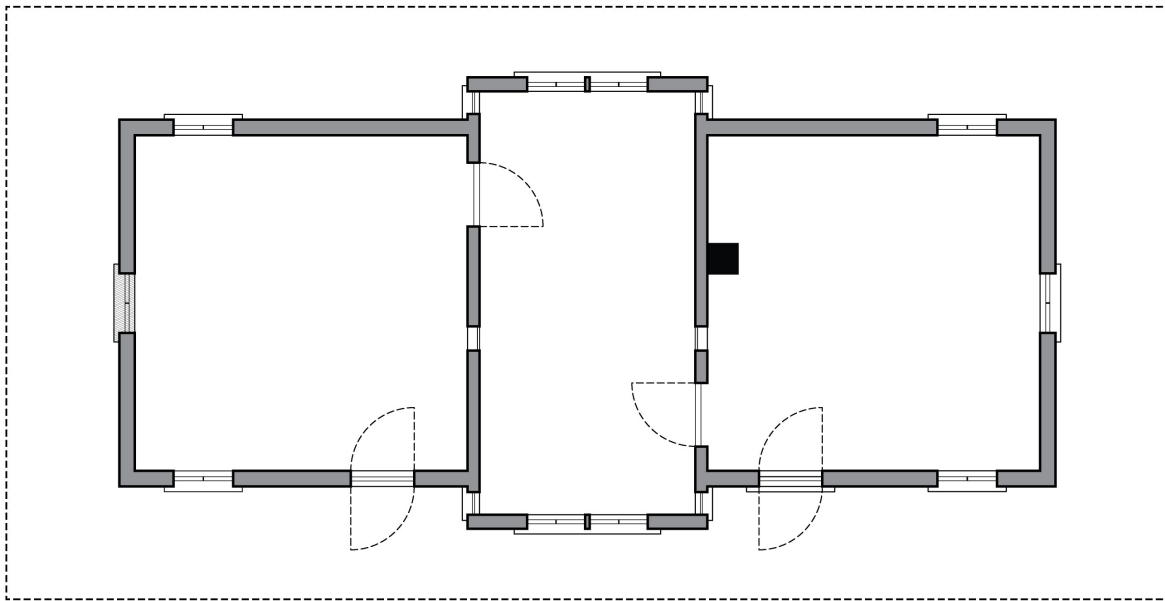
Another local, Mrs. Bartlett, whose father worked as a station agent for the Harbour Grace Railway, recalls the train schedule:

There were two regular trains a day. The first left Harbour Grace at 7:45 a.m., returning at 2:00 p.m. The other again left Harbour Grace at 5:00 p.m. She recalled that sometimes it was later at night when the last train was dispatched (Poitras 1996, 16).



Southwest elevation ^

^ Southwest elevation with roof overhang cutaway



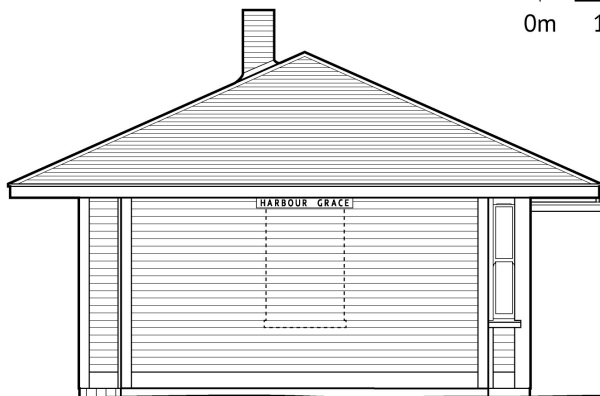
Plan ^



## HARBOUR GRACE

RAILWAY AND PASSENGER STATION

0m 1m 2m 3m



Northeast elevation ^



Southwest elevation ^

The Harbour Grace Railway station closed its doors on March 31, 1984. The last “Branch Line Train” ran in September of 1984. The station was later renamed the Gordon G. Pike Railway Heritage Museum and Park as a memorial to the late town mayor who was an advocate for heritage. The Harbour Grace Historical Society has been working on restoring the building and transforming it into a museum. The station was designated as a Municipal Heritage Building on October 5, 1996.

## Conclusion

The future of the Harbour Grace Railway Station, or the Gordon G. Pike Railway Heritage Museum and Park, remains optimistic. Town staff and Harbour Grace Historical Society have been advocating for its revival, with hopes of transforming it into a functional space.

The Harbour Grace Railway Station was designated a Registered Heritage Structure on October 6, 2016 by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador due to its historic and aesthetic value. The designation is confined to the footprint of the building and includes its interior layout and details. This building serves as an excellent example of railway station architecture of the time, and is reminiscent of an important part of Newfoundland’s history.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, Ron. 2008. *The Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore: An Illustrated History of Railway Stations in Canada*. Dundurn Group: Toronto, Ontario.
- Collier, Keith. 2010. “Roads for Rails: The Closure of the Newfoundland Railway.” Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador. <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/economy/closure-newfoundland-railway.php> (accessed July 21, 2017).
- Cuff, Robert. 2001. “Railway.” Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador. <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/economy/railway.php> (accessed July 21, 2017).
- Doull, Ian. 1988. “Stations on the Newfoundland Railway System.” Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada: Ottawa, Ontario.
- Harvey, Katherine. 2017. Interview with Patrick Collins. July 14.
- Harvey, Katherine. 2017. Interview with Wayne Cashin. August 21.
- Poitras, Natalie. 1996. “The Harbour Grace Railway: Newfoundland Southern Division.” Prepared for Harbour Grace Historical Society.
- Rolton, Chris. 1988. “Carbonear Station.” *Newfoundland Quarterly* 83, no. 3: 32-34.

## Our Mission

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 ICH 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.



Heritage Foundation  
Newfoundland & Labrador