



# Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland & Labrador

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## Architectural History of the Crocker Root Cellar, Bradley's Cove

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### Introduction

The Crocker family root cellar (see figure 1) is located in Bradley's Cove, Conception Bay. It is a rare example of a steeply-gabled, stone corbel-vaulted cellar, completely covered in a grassed-over mound of earth, with a ground-level entrance. It is almost two-hundred years old and stands out amidst the barren landscape that surrounds it, the only piece of vernacular architecture remaining in an area that was once a thriving community.

In its most basic execution, a root cellar is a structure that is built all or partially underground and reinforced using either wood, rocks, or cement. Its primary function is the preservation of vegetables over the wintertime, keeping them cool while also protecting them from frost. The Crocker root cellar has historic and aesthetic value because it is one of the few remaining root cellars in Bradley's Cove.

Much of the information presented in this paper was collected through oral history interviews and an October 17th, 2017 site visit by Heritage Foundation of NL staff Kelly Drover, Katherine Harvey, Dale Jarvis, Andrea O'Brien, and Michael Philpott, along with local residents Charis Cotter, Tracy Crocker, and Bren Follett (see figure 2).

### About Bradley's Cove

Bradley's Cove (see figure 3) is a now-resettled fishing community located about 2.5 km (1.5 mi) from the Conception Bay Highway on the tip of land east of Western Bay. The cove is mentioned as a geographic feature on a map drawn by surveyor



**Fig. 1:** Crocker's Root Cellar (photo by Katherine Harvey, 2017). • **Fig. 2:** Group in front of root cellar. (Left to right) Dale Jarvis, Michael Philpott, Charis Cotter, Bren Follett, Tracy Crocker, Katherine Harvey and Andrea O'Brien (photo by Kelly Drover, 2017). • **Fig. 3:** Aerial photo of Bradley's Cove (photo courtesy Boyd Whalen).

(Opposite page) Figs. 4 and 5: Plan of Crocker's Root Cellar by Michael Philpott, 2017.

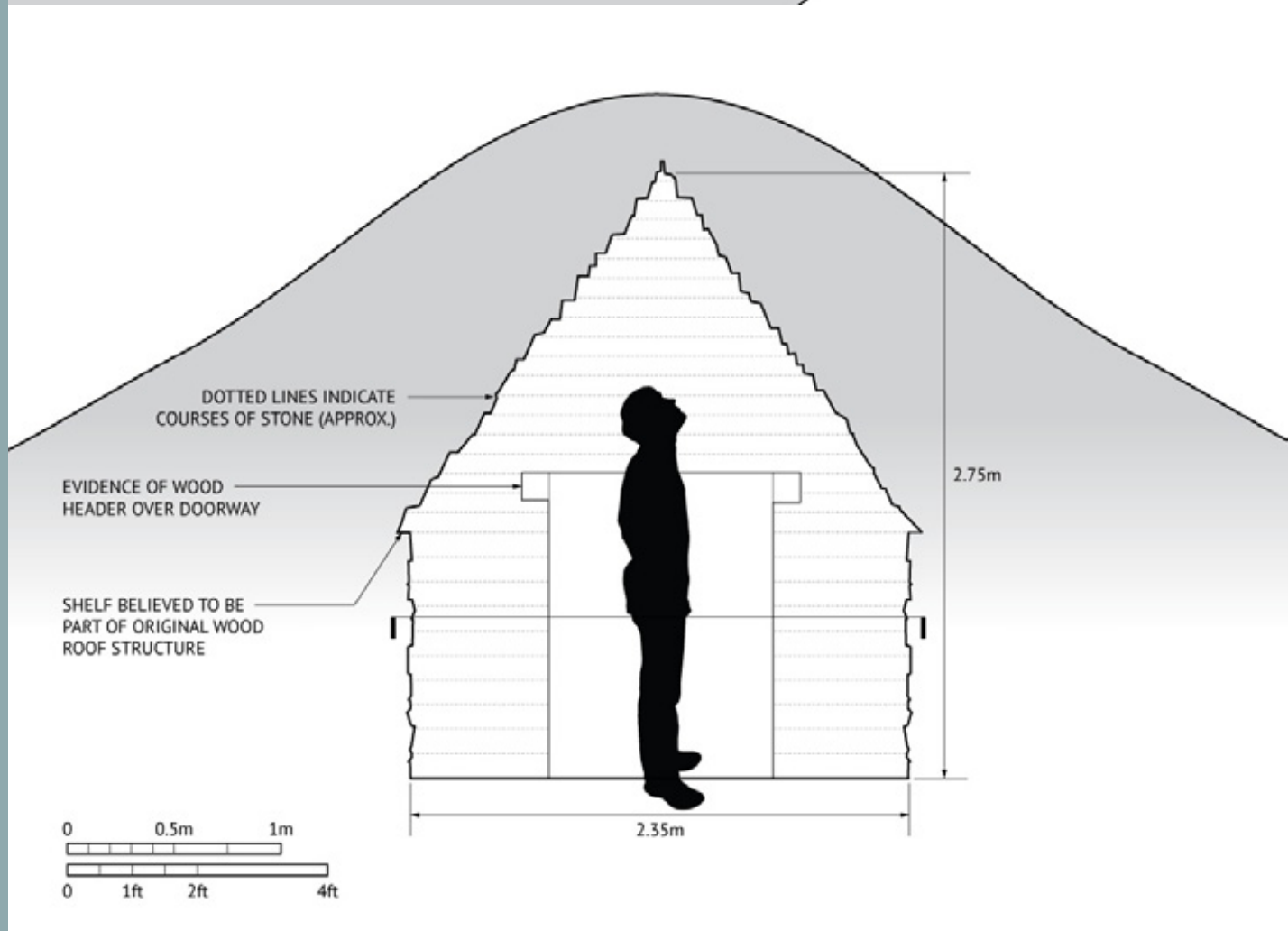
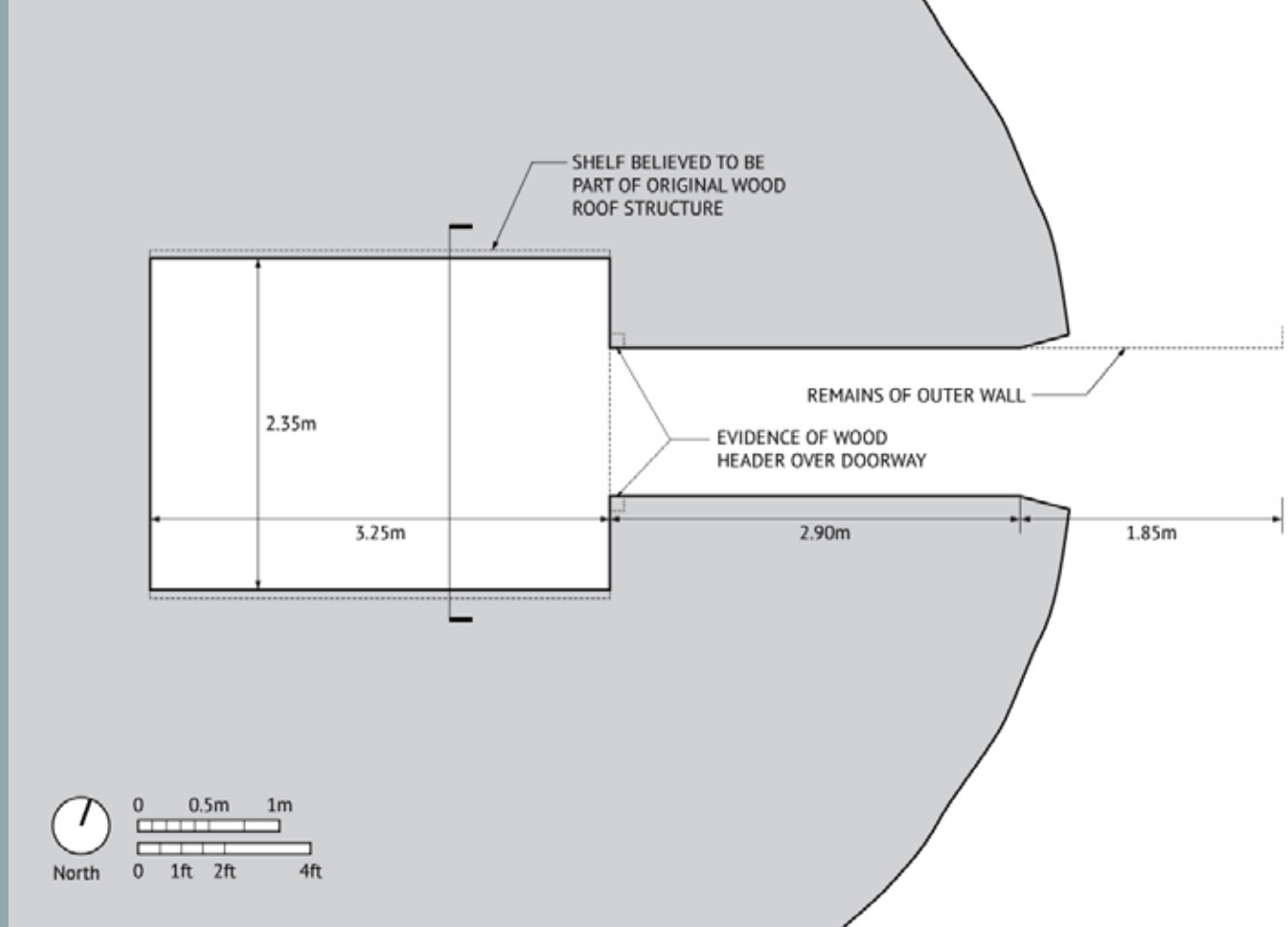
Michael Lane in 1774; by 1836 it was home to 116 "Protestant Dissenters" in fifteen dwellings with some of the earlier inhabitants belonging to the Whelan, King, and Crocker families (ENL 1981, 239).

According to family oral history, the Crocker root cellar was constructed circa 1830 by Richard and/or William Crocker, whose families had emigrated to Bradley's Cove from England.

## Construction and Cellar Design

The cellar consists of a corbelled stone vault, covered by an earthen mound, with access provided by a partially-roofed stone passageway. The interior stone structure is 2.75m high at its rear wall interior peak, with a rectangular floor area of 2.35m x 3.25 m, wider from front-to-back than side-to-side (see figure 4 and 5). The interior room is connected by a stone-lined passage to the outside of the mound, with evidence that there was originally a double-door entrance (see figure 6).

The structure was likely constructed in phases, with the lower portion of the interior stone room constructed first. There is a slightly recessed lip or shelf at the top of the side walls which, according to local oral tradition, held the original wooden rafters or "longers" (see figure 7). Family history maintains that the wooden rafters were installed first, creating a support frame, with the corbelled stone roof installed over top of the wood. The entire structure was then covered with earth and





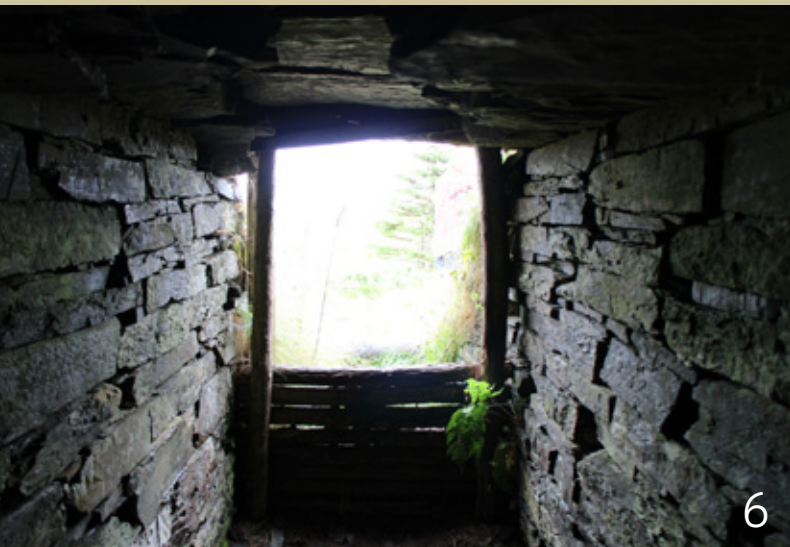


Fig. 6: View from interior of outer doorway (photo by Kelly Drover, 2017). • Fig. 7: Model of Crocker's Root Cellar made by Reagan Hopkins (photo by Kelly Drover, 2017).

sod. The original wood rafters have since disintegrated, resulting in some minor shifting of the roof structure. Tracy Crocker, a descendant of the original Crocker builders, explains:

Once you went through the tunnel, the tunnel was probably only about five-feet. You had to - you still have to duck to go in there - but as soon as you got in through the tunnel, you were given all this head space and that's where longers were. When you look at the wall, about three or four-feet-high, you'll see this little ledge before the rocks start to slant in. And that ledge is where the ends would rest, and then they all met at the peak. That was told to only last about fifty years; approximately 1830 to - I'd say the last one was probably 1870 (Crocker 2017).

The interior room of the cellar was originally shut off from the outside environment by a set of two doors, creating an airspace between them. This was important for the regulation of internal temperature, essential for the preservation of vegetables. The Crocker root cellar fits the fifth type in Braye's typology of root cellars: "the double-door ground-level entrance without a wooden structure on top" (Braye 2013:5).

This use of a two door airlock-type system was a common method of temperature regulation, as they allowed people ample time to enter the first door, shutting it behind them before entering the main portion of the root cellar.

The root cellar always had a room, before you went into the cellar, or upstairs, and you had it barred off. And if you went first into this room, you closed the outside door, then you opened the door to the cellar and got in fast. And the temperature stayed pretty normal, pretty well the same thing all the time, it didn't vary much. The same thing with the two story cellar: you had a place upstairs where you went in, and then you closed the door before you opened the, what do you call it, the place to get down? You went down a ladder to the ground floor, it was only a small room, and then the vegetables were all around it (Whalen 2017).

Today, the interior of the cellar is empty, but the cellar would have most likely been divided internally into pounds, which are wooden compartments used to separate vegetables. Boyd Whelan (see figure 8), a resident of Western Bay, speculates as to why people would separate their vegetables:

I'm not 100% sure, but I think that the cabbage wouldn't work good with other vegetables. You could have the carrot and the parsnip together. And the turnip, they were good, you could keep them anywhere . . . You didn't

keep cabbage long anyway. Grandfather used to, I can see it now, he used to keep the roots on it and hang it up in the cellar up to the ceiling, let it hang. If you cut the cabbage and put it down in the bin it wouldn't last as long as you wanted it to last. Sometimes they'd bury it outdoors; dig a hole and put a barrel or something down in, put the cabbage down in, put the barrel down with no bottom in it and cover it all in . . . in the spring we'd start to get that. That's when you got hungry [laughs] (Whalen 2017).

The location of the interior door is marked by a missing lintel that would have spanned the top of the entrance -- constructed either originally of stone which has been removed, or of timber which has rotted away. Exiting the interior room, one passes through a 3m long stone-ceiling "tunnel" or entrance passage, ending in what would have been the second, exterior door. This covered tunnel formed the "airlock" portion of the vault, essential for limiting variations in internal temperature.

Outside the cellar, the exterior portion of the "tunnel" may never have been completely covered, but originally consisted two waist-height stone retaining walls. Today, the level of the stone work is much lower than it would have been, as rocks from the walls were scavenged and used as building materials in the mid-1980s.

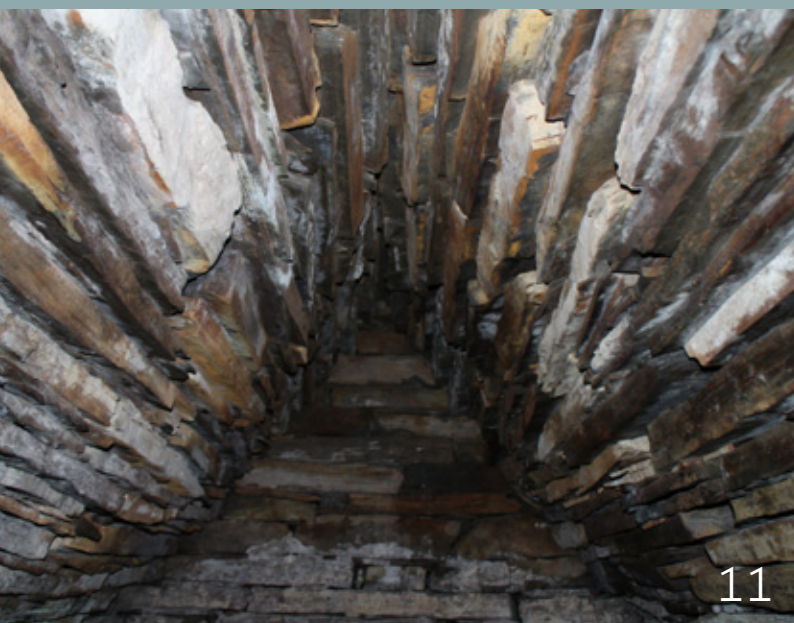
In 2017, there were portions of a wooden and wire fence visible surrounding the structure, most likely constructed in the 20th century to keep sheep and other livestock out of (or off) of the root cellar (see figure 9). Tracy Crocker tells the story of Dexter the horse and how he liked to test the strength of the cellar:

When I was a kid we had a cellar out in our garden. So my grandmother's always paranoid that when you walk in the cellar, make it quick. So when you walked in - that's the cellar that's by her house now - so when you walked in across that wooden floor, you had to get down, you had to get what you got, then you came up and you were out. So she was always paranoid about that falling in, so same with the cellar in Bradley's Cove, she'd always tell us. We always had this horse, Dexter, because it was used back then for drying wood and all this kind of stuff for the winter, and his favorite spot was on top of the cellar. She said she'd be in the kitchen, and she'd look out the window, and it's like here he is, stood tall. You'd get out, and drive him away. You'd think he'd be gone far enough distance away from it and you'd come in, do your odds and ends or whatever you had to do, turn out the window, [and he's] on the cellar again. So if he wasn't going to cave it in back then, it's still there now (Crocker 2017).



**Fig. 8:** Boyd Whalen in his home in Western Bay (photo by Katherine Harvey, 2017). • **Fig. 9:** Fence surrounding root cellar (photo by Kelly Drover, 2017). • **Fig. 10:** Crocker's Root Cellar Sign (photo by Kelly Drover, 2017).





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**Fig. 11:** Roof of root cellar (photo by Kelly Drover, 2017). • **Fig. 12:** Kelly Drover and Dale Jarvis measure interior of root cellar (photo by Katherine Harvey, 2017). • **Fig. 13:** Michael Philpott noting measurements of root cellar (photo by Kelly Drover, 2017). • **Fig. 14:** View from afar (photo by Kelly Drover, 2017).

Architect Robert Mellin has noted the use of fences to help maintain the structural integrity of root cellars during his research in Tilting, Fogo Island:

Root cellars are dark, damp, and quiet subterranean structures used for storing vegetables like potatoes and turnips. They are heavy-timbered, gable-roof structures built with logs (or later, sometimes with concrete), covered with shingles made of birch bark to reduce moisture penetration, and then topped with a thick layer of sod held in place by a perimeter picket fence. This precaution keeps animals off the top of the cellar and helps to retain the cellar's shape (Mellin 2006, 15).

## Gardening and Root Cellars in Newfoundland

Sean Cadigan writes, "Newfoundland and Labrador's climate and soil have not been conducive to agriculture, but outport isolation and poor incomes in the fishery have made supplementary farming crucial" (Cadigan 1998). Growing enough vegetables to last the winter was imperative to the survival of Newfoundlanders in the past. Without refrigerators, root cellars were one of the few methods to preserve their bounty. Most people grew root vegetables: potatoes, carrots, turnip, cabbage and beets, while others grew a wider variety of vegetables in their gardens. Boyd Whalen was one of those people. He explains:

I had two gardens. One down here and another small one over here. I grew potatoes, cabbage, turnip, beet, carrot, parsnip, broccoli sometimes, kale, lettuce. I kept everything going here with that, you know. And I could keep it, if I'd harvest at the end of fall, I could keep it downstairs. I got a cold room, it's not really a cellar. It's a cold room, separate from the basement. I had two pipes going outside so the air would circulate (Whalen 2017).

The location of people's gardens varied. Some people had their gardens on their property, while others had large plots of land that were dedicated solely to growing vegetables. Tracy Crocker asserts:

Some people do [keep their gardens on their property]. On this street, you'll have them next to your property. Riverhead, which is tightly packed more of houses, which is still part of Western Bay but it's south Riverhead north side. Riverhead is more tightly packed so you'll get people going in the woods and having their gardens in there. And they'll either have a little shack built in there or nothing. Just have their gardens in there with their hayfield that they cut with their hay. So one side is vegetables and the other is hay (Crocker 2017).

Root cellars were common in Bradley's Cove. According to Boyd Whalen, "Everyone had a root cellar. Everybody. Couldn't live without one. If you did, you were very, very poor." People learned how to build root cellars informally, and that knowledge was passed down from generation to generation. Whalen knew how to build a root cellar despite the fact that he had never built one himself:

You dig out a hole, find the rocks, not too heavy but flat rocks . . . grandfather got his up where the funeral parlour is. Just past that, there's a road that went in there and he got his off of the hill there. He had a small chisel with a blade and a wire, he used to have a wire twisted on it about this long. And he'd put it on the rock and hit it with the hammer and split the rock to the size he wanted. He was pretty good at that stuff. [Then] you get the horse and cart - horse and box cart or whatever - and bring it back and stack them up. You had to do that in the proper way too. You put one here, one here, and the next one went over the two (Whalen 2017).

# Conclusion

The root cellar was in use for vegetable storage until the Crocker family left Bradley's Cove in the 1950s. Community members began resettling to Western Bay and Adam's Cove, mainly due to the lack of electricity and other services in Bradley's Cove. The population of Bradley's Cove declined to eighty-one people in seven families by 1956, and in 1966, the remaining thirteen people in four families resettled to Western Bay (ENL 1981, 239).

As settlement shifted, the Crocker root cellar ceased to be used for storing vegetables, but continued to be used for other purposes by locals, including as a spot for local hunters to get out of the weather. Tracy Crocker recalls some of the other uses for the cellar:

You have people who go in there drinking; you find the beer bottles in there another time. Not as often now, and it was years ago. I don't know how long ago it's been. It's probably before I moved out here, so it had to be more than 10 years ago. There was a break-in up the shore, and by the time it was all said and done, they found the stash in the cellar (Crocker 2017).

In the face of shifting land-use around it and changes to its function, the cellar has endured for almost two-hundred years. Today, the Crocker root cellar remains an important local landmark in Bradley's Cove.

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## 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 Intangible Cultural Heritage Strategy. Our mission is to safeguard and sustain the 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.



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