

A History of the St. George's Courthouse



Heritage NL

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Introduction

The St. George's Courthouse was designated a Registered Heritage Structure in 2001 due to its association with developments in the Newfoundland and Labrador judicial system in the early 20th century and the changes in the Bay St. George region.



**Fig 1. St. George's Courthouse (Photo Credit
Andrea O'Brien, 2005)**

Originally built between 1903-1905, the St. George's Courthouse operated as a working courthouse for approximately 90 years while providing additional community services such as a local post office and RCMP station. In the 1990s, the province gave the St. George's Courthouse to the St. George's Indian Band Council, and it has since been used as a Band Council office and the Ktaqmkuk Mi'kmaq Historical Museum.



**Fig 2. Building plan of St. George's Courthouse
(Provided by The Rooms Archives)**

Location

St. George's is located within Bay St. George, south of Stephenville Crossing on the west coast of Newfoundland. The St. George's Courthouse is located at 183 Main Street in St. George's, directly by the intersection with Court House Road. The Courthouse is located south of the waterfront and is close to another heritage building, St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, which was built in 1898.

Historical Context of Bay St. George Region

The Bay St. George region was a part of the French Shore from 1783 to 1904, following the Treaty of Versailles that defined the borders from Cape St. John to Cape Ray, excluding the valuable regions of Bonavista and the Notre Dame bays

(Hillier 2001). Due to the Treaty of Versailles wording, the French perceived they had exclusive fishing rights along the French Shore, which impeded British settlement in the area (Hillier 2001).



Fig 3. Map of French Shore from 1783-1904. (Map by Tanya Saunders, Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage 2001)

The French fishery on the Treaty Shore declined from the 1830s, and year-round residential settlement increased, especially from the 1860s (Hillier 2001). The most populous settlement on the west coast during the 19th century was Sandy Point, located across the bay from St. George's (Mannion 1977). Despite the ambiguity of English settlement being allowed along the French Treaty Shore, permanent settlements in Bay St. George were unimpeded as it was not a prosperous area for cod but for herring and salmon, which was not the focus of the French fishery (English 2010).

Sandy Point was considered the safest harbour in Bay St. George, as it had a clear view of most settlements within the inner bay and along the coast of the Port au Port Peninsula (Mannion 1977). The early European residents of Sandy Cove were typically from Jersey, Nova Scotia, France, and the southwest of England, also known as the West Country (Mannion 1977), and their permanent settlement began in the Bay St.

George region in the 1760s (Butt 2007). Sandy Point was the major trading and retail hub in Bay St. George until the 1880s and was also the legal, administrative, and cultural centre. In the mid-1800s, Sandy Point had schools, taverns, a customs house, a courthouse, a jail, barracks, and two churches. In the 1850s, Sandy Point also briefly had two magistrates (English 2010), a central post office, a telegraph station, and regular steamer and ferry services (Mannion 1977).

By the late 19th century, nearby communities' rising lobster and mining industries moved trade out of Sandy Point (Mannion 1977). However, the primary cause of Sandy Point's decline was its location on a sandbar which was experiencing rising water levels and causing increased flooding in the community. By 1884 it was suggested that administrative services be relocated to nearby communities, such as St. George's. In 1898 the railway line was built on the west coast, and a station was constructed in St. George's, increasing the community's population and access to goods (Mannion 1977). The residents of Sandy Point were resettled to St. George's, and the community was abandoned by the 1970s. Sandy Point is now an island except during low tide.

The current municipality of St. George's consists of the three former communities of Seal Rocks, South Side (formerly known as Little Bay), and Shallop Cove (Butt 2007). In 1804 Seal Rocks was established as a permanent Mi'kmaq village following centuries of prior migratory Mi'kmaq groups in the regions (Butt 2007). Bay St. George in Mi'kmaw is Nozwa'smkisk or "Where the Sand Blows" (Anger 1988).

Construction and Building Description

The St. George's Courthouse was likely built to replace the courthouse in Sandy Point, which is described in an 1889 report by John T. Nevill, the Inspector of Public Buildings, as being "very old and dilapidated" (Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador 2022).

When William Henry Churchill was appointed as the new Superintendent of Public Buildings in 1895, there was a boom of new public buildings being constructed, including several courthouses built in the same style.



Fig 4. Greenspond Courthouse (Photo Credit Heritage NL)

These included new courthouses in Bonavista (built between 1897-1899), Greenspond (1900-1901), Bell Island (1900), Placentia (1902), Trinity (1903), St. George's (1903-1905), and Burin (1905) (Rostecki 1977).



Fig 5. Trinity Courthouse (Photo Credit Heritage NL)

The current St. John's Courthouse on Water Street was also constructed during Churchill's tenure from 1901-1904 but is built from stone instead of wood and in a different style.

The St. George's Courthouse and most of the earlier courthouses constructed under Churchill

were built in the Second Empire style with a two-sided mansard roof and a prominent frontal tower used as a stairway, visible in fig 10 in the Appendix (Rostecki 1977). However, the St. George's and Greenspond Courthouses are only two stories tall, as opposed to the three-story standard for courthouses built during this period. The St. George's Courthouse has a wooden structure with concrete foundation and dormer windows on the roof (Rostecki 1977).

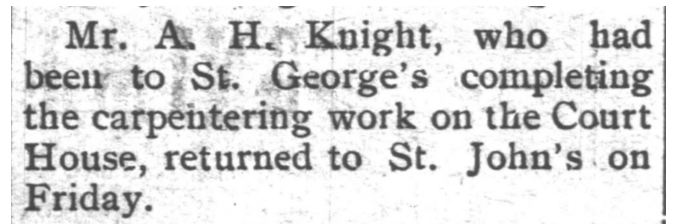


Fig 6. Western Star, 1905-06-07.

The plans for the Courthouse were developed by the Department of Public Works in 1903 and tenders were being accepted from contractors to complete the project in August (Evening Telegram 1903). By 1904 the construction of the Courthouse was underway and supervised by St. John's contractor Mr. Arch H. Knight (Western Star 1905a). By April of 1905, the structure of the Courthouse was complete and was "papered and painted" by a Mr. Collier of St. John's (Western Star 1905b).

History as a Courthouse

When the Courthouse first began operating, it became the seat of the Magistrate in the area (Rostecki 1977). The original layout of the Courthouse (fig 11 in Appendix) contained the Post Office, Customs Office, four cells, a day room, three bedrooms, and a parlour (Rostecki 1977). However, it was not the Magistrate who resided at the Courthouse, as a separate residence was built next door for his dwelling (Rostecki 1977). Originally the courtroom occupied the entire second floor (Rostecki 1977), visible in fig 12 in the Appendix.

Over the years, the uses of the Courthouse changed to match the community's needs. In

1943 the interior of the building was altered with the addition of the Constabulary (later the RCMP), a drug room, a treatment room and offices on the main floor. The courtroom upstairs was reduced in size from 62 ft. by 36 ft. to 28 ft. to 36 ft. to accommodate the addition of a hallway, the customs office, the district agriculturalist's office, the Magistrate's office, a stenographer and the police offices (Rostecki 1977).

On January 13th, 1939, the stock room adjacent to the Magistrate's office caught fire, and during the extinguishing, there was extensive water damage (Western Star 1939). In the original building plans, there is no mention of a stock room, and the adjoining rooms to the Magistrate's office are a bedroom, the post office, and the jail cells. It is possible that prior to the renovations in 1943, the uses of rooms had already been changed, such as removing the living spaces.

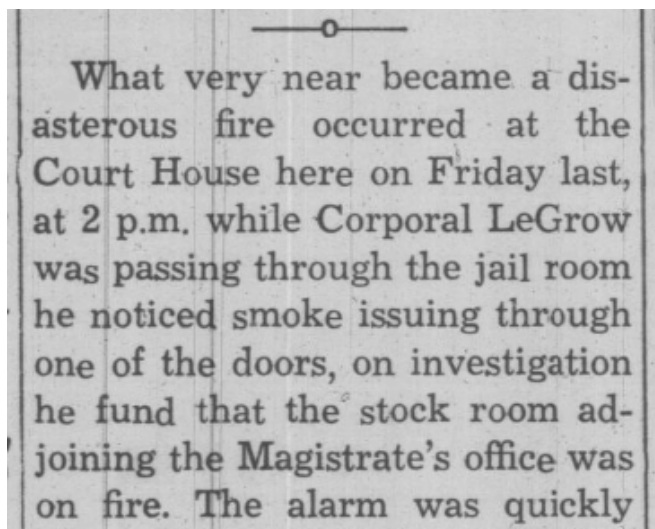


Fig 7. Western Star, 1939-01-18

Further changes were made in 1952, with a clinic replacing the first-floor jail, and the jail likely moved into the basement (Rostecki 1977). By 1977 the Courthouse housed the Welfare Department, the RCMP, the Magistrate's Court, the jail and some offices (Rostecki 1977).

However, the St. George's Courthouse also had non-judicial uses as a space for various community events and as a meeting space. The Courthouse was the site of several dances, including an Anglican tea and dance fundraiser

for their church (Western Star 1914) and a Patriotic Dance fundraiser (Western Star 1916).

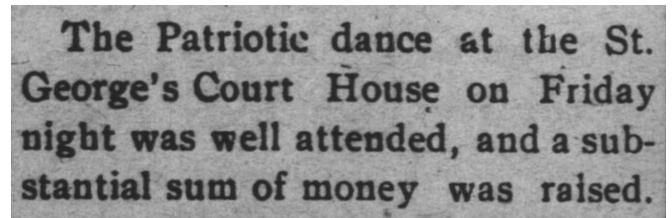


Fig 8. Western Star, 1916-02-02.

The Courthouse was also used as a polling station during elections (Western Star 1913a) and as the site of a public reception during a visit from the Governor of Newfoundland, Sir Walter Edward Davidson (Western Star 1913b).

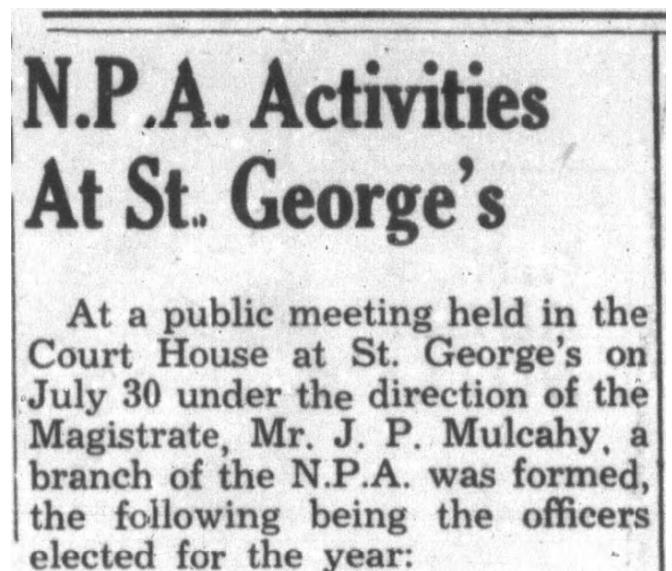


Fig 9. Western Star, 1940-09-11.

Finally, the Courthouse was used as the site of various public meetings, including for committees such as the WPA (Women's Patriotic Association) and the NPA (Newfoundland Patriotic Association) during the World Wars (Western Star 1915; Western Star 1940). It was also the site for protesting government measures, such as in 1908 when locals protested against the use of cod traps and deep nets during the Spring herring season, an important industry in Bay St. George, by signing a petition (Vallis 1974).

Conclusion

Since the 1990s the St. George's Courthouse has been used as the office for the local band council and in recent years as the site for the Ktaqmkuk Mi'kmaq Historical Museum. St. George's has a long history as an important Mi'kmaq site and continues to support and preserve Mi'kmaq culture in Newfoundland and Labrador.

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Appendix

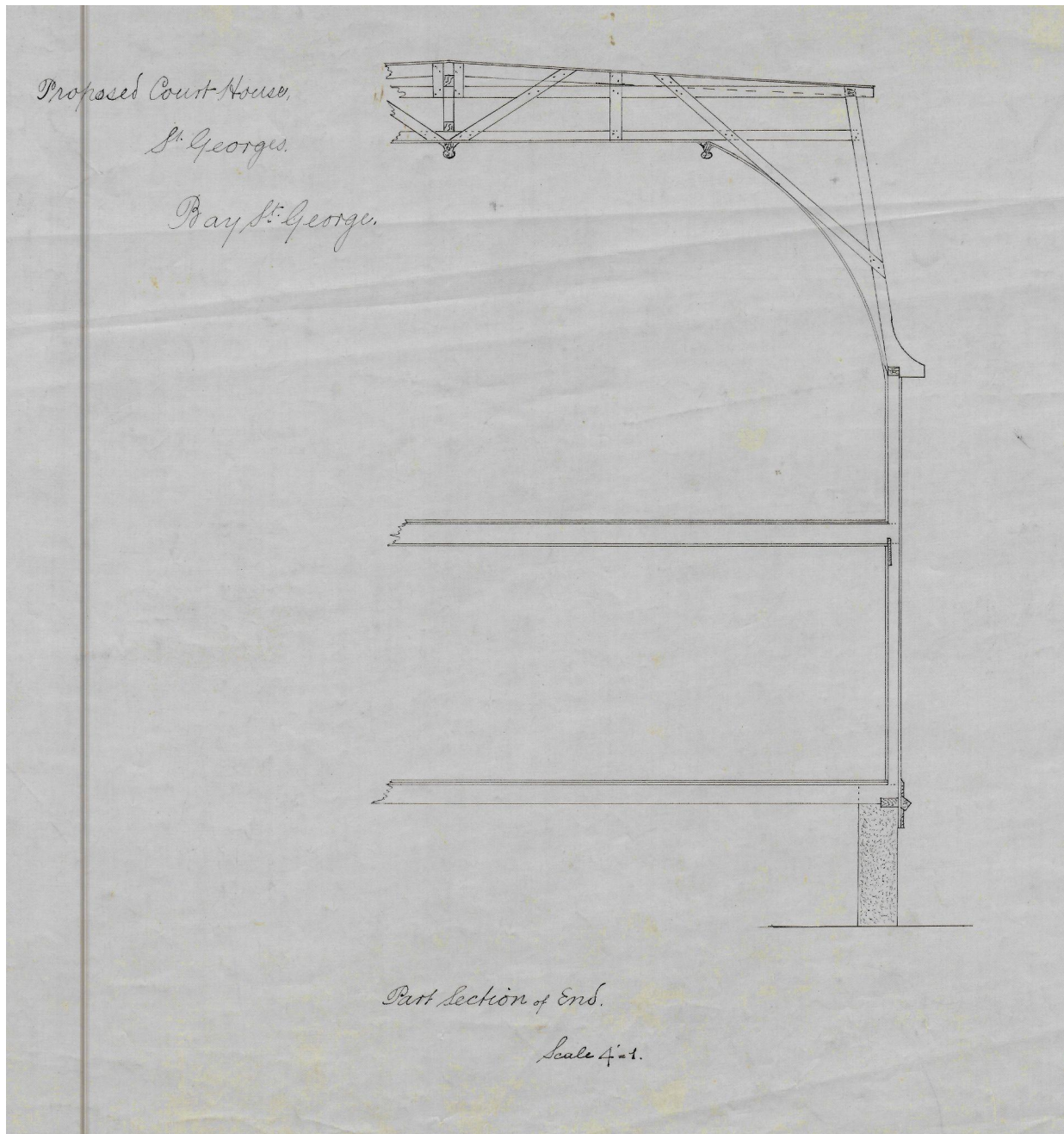


Fig 10. Building plan of tower (Provided by The Rooms Archives)

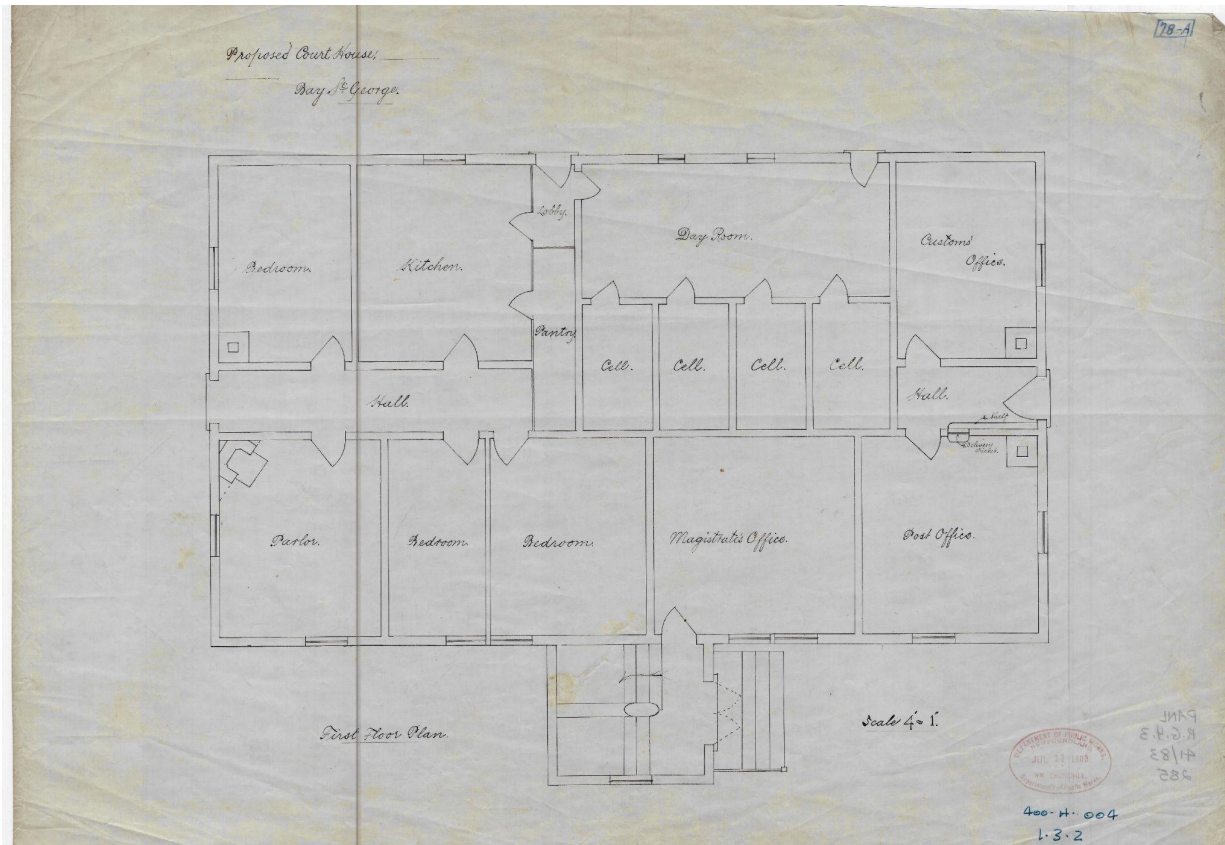


Fig 11. Building plan of first floor (Provided by The Rooms Archives)

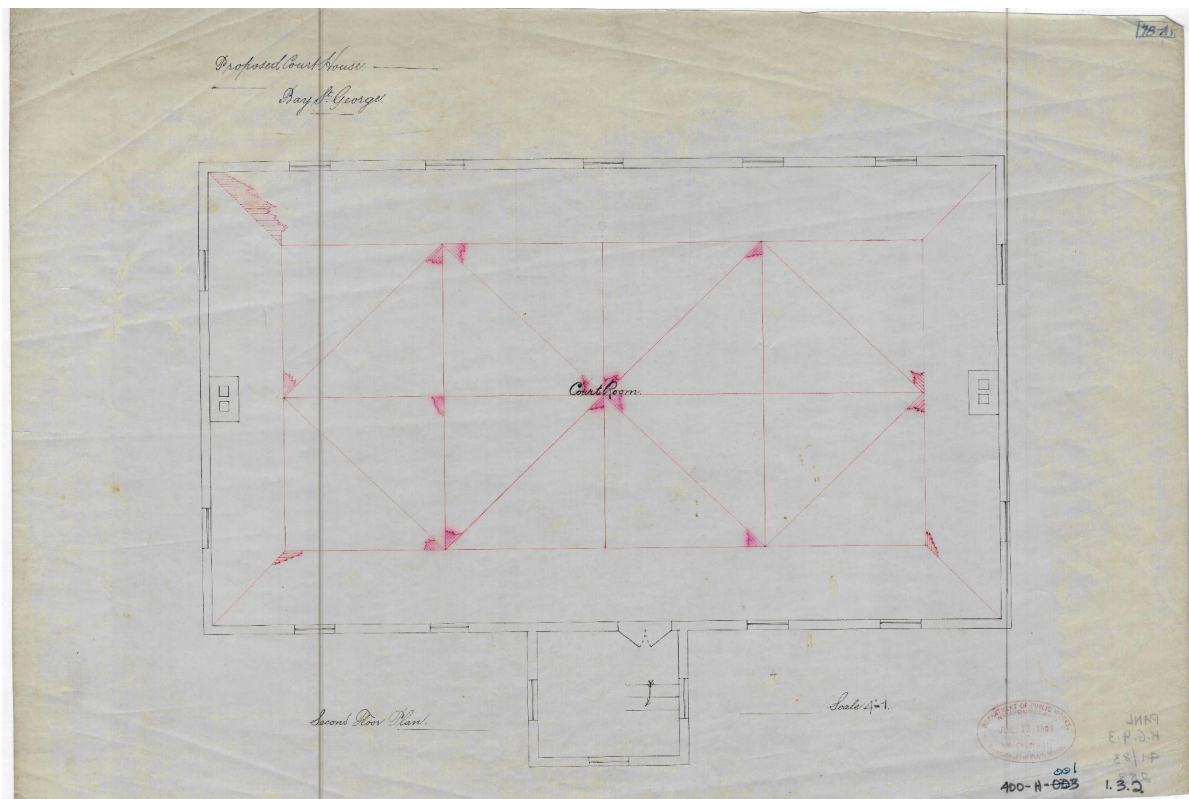


Fig 12. Building plan of second floor courtroom (Provided by The Rooms Archive)