

## Fowler House: A Historic Home in Brigus



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By Megan Webb

### Introduction

The three-storey yellow mansard-roof dwelling that is now known by the name of “Fowler House” in Brigus, NL was designated as a Registered Heritage Structure by Heritage NL in 1988 for its historic value. It is thought to have been given its title after the Fowler family who occupied the property for nearly a century from the early 1900s up to the 1990s. It changed hands a few times, but throughout that time it is thought that it was owned exclusively by various Fowler relatives.



**Fig. 1** Image of Fowler House taken. Photo courtesy of Heritage NL, 2017.

### Building Description

The structure is thought to have been constructed circa 1850 by a local contractor by the name of William Azariah Green for a mariner and his wife, known as the Garlands. Nicholas Smith’s book *Fifty-two Years at the Labrador Fishery* and John N. Leamon’s book *Brigus: Past Glory, Pleasant Splendour* both identify the Garlands as the earliest occupants of the Fowler House. These accounts also suggest that the structure was altered in the 1880s, possibly with the addition of the third storey and change in roof. Judging from the mansard roof, which was a style not especially common in the 1850s, this seems plausible. The window styles, especially the 6 over 6 pane windows, are indicative of an 1850s date.

The most iconic and distinctive part of the structure is the roller located at the base of a door on the second floor of the addition - this served as a way to ease pulling fishing nets up from the street into the loft to mend them.



**Fig. 2** Image of attachment to Fowler House. Photo courtesy of Heritage NL, 2021.

As the town of Brigus was heavily involved in the fishery, having Fowler House as a tangible representation of the history of the fishery in the community is very valuable. Just below the twine loft was a store, indicated by the large multi-paned window, that was at one time used to sell hats that had been displayed for all to see.

Another unique part of the house is that it has five entrances: three on the first floor,



**Fig. 3** Front door.



**Fig 4.** Side door.

one on the second floor, and one on the third floor, all of which are technically on ground level. This is due to the fact that the house was built on and into the hill behind it.



**Fig. 5 & 6.** Second level and third level back doors. Images courtesy of Heritage NL.

## Location

The Fowler House is located at 9 Harbour Drive in Brigus near Harbour Pond. It is situated fairly close to the street, however, there is a significant portion of land behind the house on the top of the hill that is part of the property. This land was at one time used to grow various fruits and vegetables.





**Fig. 7 Image of the roof, garden, and outbuildings.**  
Image courtesy of Facebook group Brigus Folks,  
Then and Now

## Historical Context

Brigus was well-known for its involvement in the Newfoundland and Labrador Fishery, especially the Labrador Fishery. As noted in Nicholas Smith's *Fifty-two Years at the Labrador Fishery*:

“Brigus was a very prominent outpost in those days, with about forty vessels all engaged in the Labrador fishery, from a 200-ton brig down to a 30-ton fore and aft schooner, employing about one thousand men and girls, besides the squatters who fished on the land in stage.”



**Fig. 8 Image of schooners in Brigus Harbour.**  
Image courtesy of Facebook page Brigus Folks,  
Then and Now.

One of more famous fishing companies that operated out of Brigus was the J. & G. Smith Company, of which the Fowler House was a

family home for the brother William George Spear Smith. This company is discussed at length in John N. Leamon's book *Bigus: Past Glory, Present Splendour*.

“They operated three shops in Brigus where eight young men, two girls, and a cash boy were employed. There was also a branch store at Bakeapple, Labrador. They supplied for the fishery on a very large scale and gave hundreds of people employment, as well as buying everything that came their way, from birch brooms to No. 1 codfish and salmon” (Leamon, pg. 143).

Another connection is made between the house and the fishery as the top portion of the attached lean-to was used as a twine loft, indicated by the roller at the base of the door to ease the process of pulling nets up to be mended. And, lastly, in true Brigus fashion, the house is built onto the natural hillside, which is a common theme seen throughout the older structures in Brigus.



**Fig. 9 Image of Fowler House around mid-1980s.**  
Image courtesy of Facebook group Brigus Folks,  
Then and Now.

## Occupancy Timeline

A full timeline for the life of the structure is difficult to present since most early records of the house have been lost. However, with

archival research, architectural evidence, and oral histories, we have been able to conjure a general timeline.

**1850** - Construction by William A. Green for Mr. and Mrs. Garland

**1880** - Occupied by Smith's (William George Spear Smith and Elizabeth Keeping Smith)

**1890** - Addition of lean-to for Smith's twins

**1920s** - Occupied by Michael and Frances Fowler

**1950s** - Occupied by William (Bill) Fowler and Mary Flynn Fowler

**1960** - Occupied by Richard (Rich, Bill's son) and Sadie Fowler who inherited the house

**1982** - Exterior renovation - underneath clapboard was signed June 11, 1982

**1988** - Designated as Registered Heritage Structure - application by John N. Leamon

**1995** - Owned by Terrance Burke - changes to first floor/removal of chimney

**2010** - Owned by Gareth Griffiths - changes to second floor

**2017** - Current owners Stephen and Stacey Burfitt

**2022** - Restoration project

### **Garland**

We know very little about some of the supposed earliest occupants of the house, Master Mariner Garland and his wife Mrs. Garland. However, there is mention that the house was built by William A. Green for the Garlands. In John Leamon's book he references the Garlands:

"It was here, also, during the occupancy of the place by the Garlands, that Mrs. Garland conducted her business as a milliner, dealing in ribbons, bonnets, etc., and making and selling hats that she had so neatly arranged on stands in the display

window" (Personal communication with John Spracklin in Leamon's book).

According to marriage records from Brigus, an Ebenezer Garland married Mary Ann Loveys in July of 1850 (*Newfoundland Vital Statistics, 1753-1893*). Perhaps the house was constructed in 1850 for the newlyweds.

### **Smith**

There is indication that early occupants of the house were the family of William George Spear Smith from the 1880s.



**Fig. 10 Image of William George Spear Smith and wife Elizabeth Keeping. Image courtesy of Harold Smith.**

Their occupancy is mentioned in Nicholas Smith's book, John Leamon's book, and was referenced in an interview with a direct descendant, Harold Smith. William George Spear Smith, also known as George Smith, was one of the brothers that composed the well-known Brigus J. & G. Smith Company (Smith 2022). Although there was mention that the attachment was used by the Garlands earlier, documentation provided by the family of Harold Smith indicates that the attachment that is recognized as the store



and twine loft was a wing built in 1890 after the birth of the Smith's twins (Smith, 2022).

### **Fowler**

There were many Fowlers that resided in the house over the years, however, the earliest that we know to have lived in the house were Michael and Frances Fowler.



**Fig. 11 Image of Michael and Frances Fowler. Image courtesy of Eileen Madden.**

Michael and Frances Fowler moved to Brigus from Cupids in the early 1920s and settled in the Fowler House. It is possible, but we are not sure, that these are the occupants who, being the first Fowler owners, were the reason that the house is known as “Fowler House.” Michael and Frances had six children, five girls and one boy: Sister Mary Angela Fowler, Pauline (nee Fowler) Melvin, Leo Fowler, Doris (nee Fowler) Chafe, Ignatia (nee Fowler) Madden and Veronica (nee Fowler) Whalen (Madden 2022).

After Michael and Frances Fowler left there was a gap of information regarding who owned the house. We were able to discern

that after Michael and Frances the house was occupied by William (Bill) Fowler (1880-1961), a fisherman from Burnt Head, and Mary Flynn (Ann) Fowler (1878-1964), from Frog Marsh (Personal communication, Costello 2022). Bill and Mary had two children, Richard and Madeline. After they passed the house was inherited by their son, locally well-known Richard Fowler, and his wife Sadie (nee Shea) Fowler.



**Fig. 12 Image from left to right: Madeline, her two children Patricia and Lorraine, and mother Mary Fowler. Image courtesy of Allan Costello.**



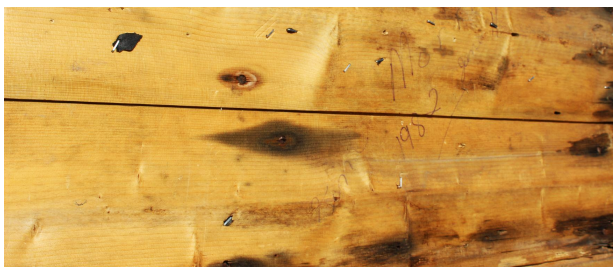
**Fig. 13 Image of Richard Fowler. Image courtesy of Allan Costello.**

## Architectural Changes

To begin assessment our team created blank floorplans by measuring the outside of the first and second floor, and the inside of the first floor of Fowler House. These aid in the identification of sloping walls and unusual construction, which can be connected to the unique building of the dwelling on the slope of a hill (see appendix).

It also provided an opportunity for individuals who were interested and knew the previous layouts of the dwelling to add/interpret the floorplan and send it back to us, such as the example where Neil Shea, nephew of Sadie Fowler, reviewed the plans and made notes from his memories of the house in the 1960s (see appendix).

From recent renovation a siding change was indicated by signatures on the wood underneath the clapboard - dated June 11, 1982, wood planks were signed by Richard Fowler, Roxanne Hayes, Kim Morrissey, Ken Barrett, and Wm Hayes.



**Fig. 14 & 15 Images of signatures on siding. Image courtesy of Heritage NL, 2022.**

The majority of the architectural changes that we are aware of are those that happened during the 1995-2010 ownership of Terry Burke. From an interview with his brother, Tom Burke, we were able to discern the reason for construction that altered the first floor of the dwelling. The most significant change was the removal of the chimney - which resulted in the adjustment of the entire first floor when it was discovered to be a structural component. Therefore, the walls separating the rooms on the first floor were removed and a steel beam was installed on the ceiling for stabilization. The flooring on the first floor was also changed as a spring-well present in the inside back porch had caused water damage to the wood to the extent that it needed to be taken up and completely replaced, in addition to filling in the well. The stairs leading from the first to second floor were altered. Additions included a kitchen island, furnace, laundry room, a door from the dining room into the store attachment, and a linen closet on the second floor (Burke, 2022).

Some more minor architectural changes occurred during the 2010-2017 ownership of Gareth Griffiths. An interview with Griffiths identified the reasoning behind the changes made then as well. He identified that the majority of the work he did in the house was primarily for maintenance only. He put cupboards in the kitchen, made the kitchen island bigger, added a door from a second floor bedroom into the twine loft, put gyprock on the walls of the twine loft, built a deck on the upper level of the hill behind the house, and removed the damaged multi-paned window from the store window and placed it on the inside as a facade with a modern picture window outside (Griffiths, 2022).



Last but not least, the contemporary renovations underway by the current owners, Stephen and Stacey Burfitt, that are part of Heritage NL's Revitalization Grant, working with heritage restoration professionals to restore and preserve the exterior of the house as well as possible.



**Fig. 16 Image of clapboard removal. Image courtesy of Stephen Burfitt, 2022.**

## Conclusion

The above details from around 1850 to present day are only some of the history of the house, as new information is constantly being discovered. The Fowler House will continue to be an important part of the history of Brigus and of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Information from this fieldnote, including interviews and images, will be available on Memorial

University's online Digital Archives Initiative for public access.

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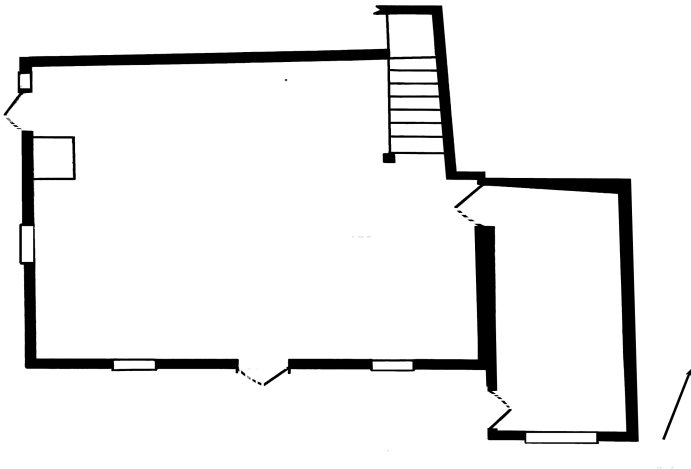
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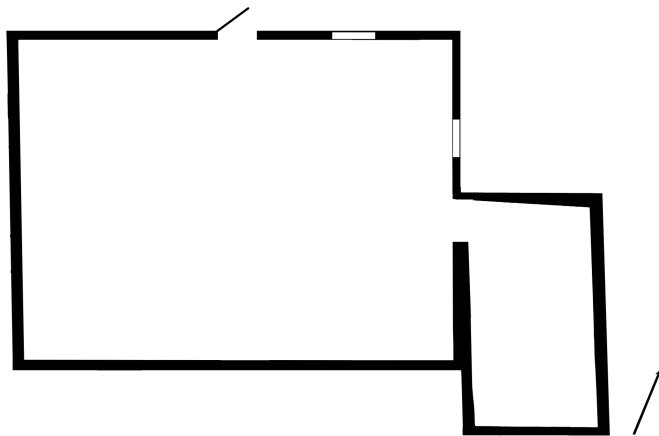
## Appendix

### Floorplans

#### First Floor

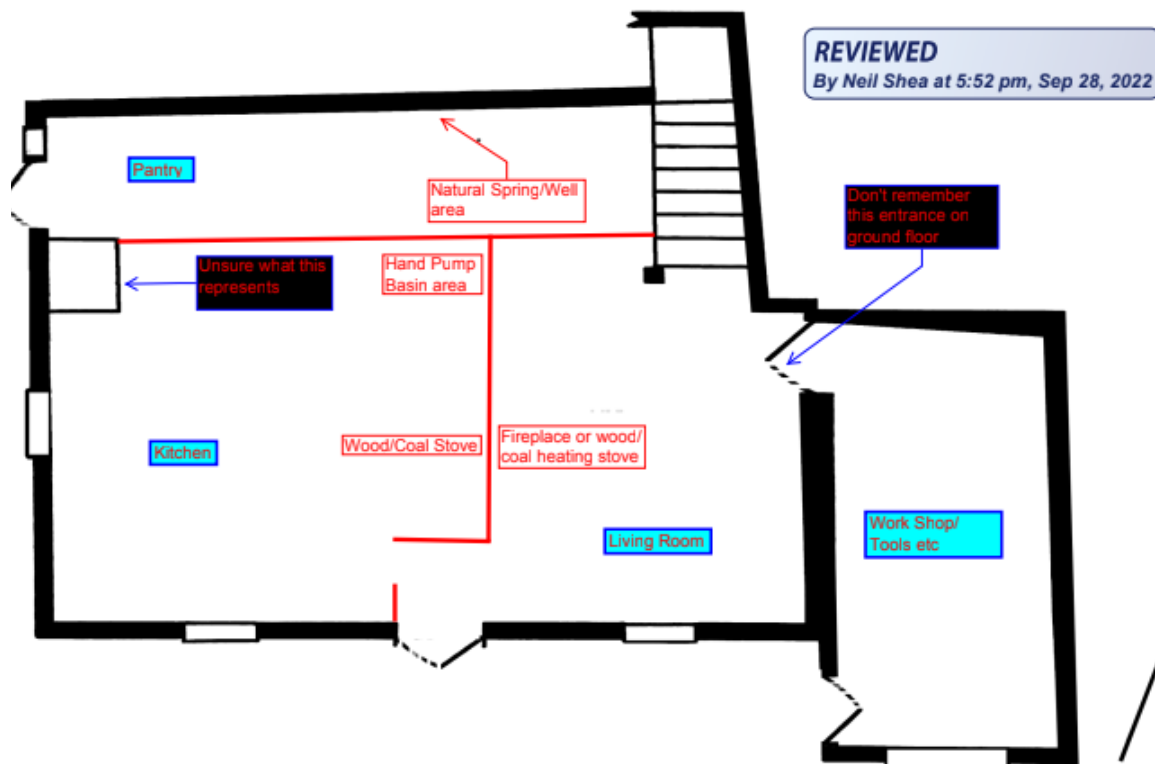


#### Second Floor





First Floor: Reviewed by Neil Shea, 2022.



Second Floor: Reviewed by Neil Shea, 2022.

