

Heart's Content Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2



Heritage NL

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By Emlyn Tuck

Introduction

The Heart's Content Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2 are located at 21 School Road in Heart's Content, NL, approximately 130 kilometres west of St. John's on the Avalon Peninsula. The houses were commissioned by the Anglo-American Telegraph Company (AATC) to accommodate employees of their cable station just down the road (Harvey, 2017). They were built in 1882 by building company J. & J. T. Southcott in the Second Empire style. Cable Staff House #1 was designated as a Registered Heritage Structure by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador in 1995 and Cable Staff House #2 was designated in 1997. The designation is confined to the footprint of the buildings.

Building Description

The staff houses are timber framed with brick nogging and stand two-storeys tall. Built in the Second Empire style, they have a number of modified style elements that contribute to their aesthetic value. For example, the window trim on the first storey of the front facade has elements of an entablature. The dormer shape is a variation on the typical Second Empire style semicircular dormer as it includes a keystone element at the top. All of these elements are indicative of a sense of creativity on the part of the architect - John Thomas Southcott of J. & J. T. Southcott, Architects, Carpenters and Builders.



Fig #1. Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2 in Heart's Content. (Heritage NL, 2017)

Building History

Timeline of Ownership for Cable Staff House #1

1882-1963 – Anglo-American Telegraph Company
1963-1968 – Western Union International Inc.
1968-1969 – Victor and Miriam Penny
1969-1988 – Herbert and Emily Angel
1988-1992 – Emily Angel
1992-1993 – Adrian, Herbert Jr., Gerald, and William Angel
1993-1995 – Cyril and Elizabeth Rideout
1995-2006 – John and Judy Moss
2006-2010 – John Moss
2010-2022 – 63782 Newfoundland and Labrador Limited
2022-Today – Valerie and Hank Whelan

Timeline of Ownership for Cable Staff House #2

1882-1963 – Anglo-American Telegraph Company
 1963-1968 – Western Union International Inc.
 1968-1975 – Victor and Miriam Penny
 1975-1996 – Francis and Ruby Macallister
 1996-2006 – John and Judy Moss
 2006-2010 – John Moss
 2010-2022 – 63782 Newfoundland and Labrador Limited
 2022-Today – Valerie and Hank Whelan

Construction

J. & J. T. Southcott, Architects, Carpenters and Builders

John and James Thomas Southcott solidified their position of being the colony's major contractors in 1866 when they began a relationship with the AATC. In Heart's Content they constructed cable offices as well as staff houses for the workers of the AATC (O'Dea, 2003). Such as in 1868, when the Southcotts built permanent living quarters for the staff of the cable station, i.e. a block of apartments on the road in front of the office, called Cable Terrace (Rowe, 51).



Fig #2. Cable Terrace, Heart's Content, circa 1888-1908. (The Rooms Provincial Archives)

They were able to keep up this relationship with the AATC due to their reliability. Ezra Wheedon, the superintendent of the cable station, even recommended them to proceed on a project without a formal contract, specifically the Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2 and others (O'Dea, 2003).

John Thomas Southcott, son of James Southcott, had moved to England to study architecture under William R. Best. Following his return to Newfoundland, the firm began building houses in the Second Empire style (Bibliographic Dictionary of Architects in Canada, 2023).

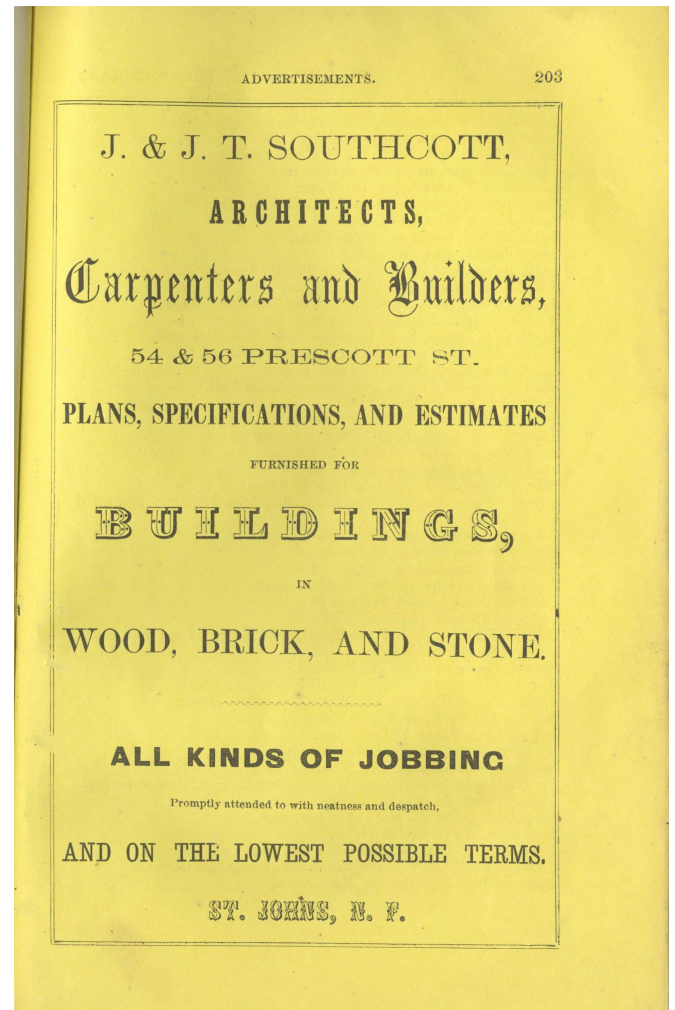


Fig #3. J. & J.T. Southcott advertisement from 1865. (Hutchinson Newfoundland Directory, 1864-65)

Over time the Second Empire style began to be associated with the Southcotts and the city of St. John's. But the style wasn't confined to the city, as the firm had built a number of two storey Second Empire style staff houses for the senior staff at the Heart's Content Cable Station, and the "style seems to have become the accepted new form after the return of the younger Southcott" (O'Dea, 2003).



Fig #4. Superintendent Wheedon's House and the Cable Staff Houses, circa 1919. (National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institute)

The project that resulted in Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2 came about when Ezra Wheedon realized the extent of Heart's Content's housing problem in 1880, as the station's workforce had increased. At that time there were 24 married men on staff, with 9 living in company housing, 3 in houses of their own, and 12 in rental accommodation. The plan was to build six new two-story houses (Rowe 70-71). But aesthetics might also have been a consideration. The staff homes (including the one Wheedon himself would occupy) would be designed in the "fashionable Second Empire style favoured by the well-to-do of St. John's and added a decided flair to the look and feel of the community" (Rowe, 71).

The summer of 1881 was a wet one, slowing down construction on the houses. The exteriors of the houses were finished just before the end of the year and the interiors were worked on through the winter. Five of the houses, including Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2 were finished by the end of 1882.

These houses were filled with fine furniture and many of the pieces were imported from England (Rowe, 71). Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2 were built with a 2 foot thick stone foundation and an 8 foot high basement. The walls were timber framed with brick nogging. Large, counterweighted windows were installed as well as two chimneys, eight fireplaces, dormer windows, skylights above the stairs, decorative ceilings, moldings, doors, and window trim.

There was a diphtheria epidemic in the town from 1880-81. When it ended, Wheedon "lobbied the company to clean up the water supply once and for all" and they eventually "agreed to a gravity-fed system from Southern Cove Pond" (Rowe, 72). In 1883 with The Heart's Content Water Supply Act, which was passed by the Newfoundland legislature, the AATC was given the ability to "install and maintain a water line through the community and the right to protect the water supply" (Rowe, 72). The ownership and administration of the water system was kept and controlled by the company (Rowe, 72). The waterline was brought directly to the cable office and from there connected to all of the houses occupied by staff. The Southcotts were called back to install plumbing in the group of houses they had finished the year prior (Rowe, 73).



Fig #5. View of Heart's Content looking towards St. Mary's Anglican Church and Cable Staff Houses, pre 1904. (Town of Heart's Content Archives)

Grounds

The grounds of Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2 have some remarkable trees and plants, but most impressive is the copper beech tree in front of House #2. Valerie Whelan and her husband, the current owners of the property, pointed out the sheer size of the tree. It is believed that it, along with a number of other plants on the property, was brought over from England to be planted in the yard. Valerie has talked to her neighbour Fred Sinyard, who is in his 70s, about the beech tree and other large trees on the property. He lives in front of the staff houses and he says they've been

large all his life. Other trees to take note of on the property include the European maples and oaks.

Next door, a line of cherry trees at the rear of the superintendent's house delineates the property boundary. Speaking with her 91-year-old neighbour, Valerie learned that the cherry trees were already mature when the superintendent's house was bought from Western Union in 1968. They too are most likely from England and were purpose planted.



Fig #6. Looking towards the centre of Heart's Content with St. Mary's Anglican Church on the hill and Cable Station Houses with copper beech trees, 1970s. (Town of Heart's Content Archives)

From an interview in 2013, Wallace Rendell tells more about the immigration of the plants from England. Many English people moved to Heart's Content to work in the cable station, and they wanted to bring a piece of England with them, including plants that reminded them of home (Wilson, 2013).

"So in this little wee town you can imagine the social impact. In this little fishing village suddenly you get this new industry, the new culture. And with them we got running water, we got libraries, tennis courts, cricket fields, lots of plants from England that are still growing there now, the beech trees. That, like so many things do in life, rose to an apex and then gradually declined because of the technological changes, and that little society did the same thing" (Wilson, 2013).

From old landscape pictures of Heart's Content and closer shots of the Cable Staff Houses, we believe the trees were planted sometime in the

early 20th century. In a picture taken before 1904, there does not seem to be any trees in front of the houses. But a picture from 1919 shows some small, young trees in front of the Cable Staff Houses. From this, we can assume that the trees were not planted when the houses were built, but rather planted sometime afterward.

Renovation

John and Judy Moss

In the 1990s, John and Judy Moss took on the restoration of Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2. They acquired House #1 in 1995 and House #2 in 1996. John and Judy were well-known for their renovation work, as they had previously renovated multiple buildings in the province. After their retirement they decided to have one last go at renovating and moved to Heart's Content. They made many updates to the two buildings, both exterior and interior. For the exterior changes, they worked on the foundation, roof, flashing, eavestroughs, downspouts, chimneys, cladding, doors, windows, paint, and other projects such as molding repairs and removing debris.



Fig #7. Heart's Content Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2. (Heritage NL, 2007)

For the interior, they completed some similar tasks for both houses as each house had its own need of repairs. For Cable Staff House #1, they removed damaged plaster and paint, replastered and repainted, upgraded the electrical and the

plumbing, refinished the wood floors, retiled some floors, installed a furnace, and repaired hardware and woodwork around the home. For Cable Staff House #2, they again removed damaged plaster and paint, replastered and repainted, upgraded the electrical, refinished the wood floors, installed a furnace, and again repaired hardware and woodwork throughout the home.

In 1999, the Cable Staff Houses won the Southcott Award for Restoration.

63782 Newfoundland and Labrador Limited (Company director Ed Woodley)

In 2010 the houses were sold to 63782 Newfoundland and Labrador Limited. Ed Woodley was a director with the company and his partner (later wife) Lynda Moss was the daughter of John and Judy Moss. The restoration of the property continued under the new owners. During an interview with Downhome Magazine, Ed remembers John - "When he saw those cable houses about 25 years ago he realized if somebody doesn't do something, they're going to be gone" (Miller, 2016).

There was still lots of work to be done to finish renovating the homes, as much was rotted. "The clapboard was rotted, what was under the clapboard was rotted, the main joist was rotted...then when we got inside, the ceilings were ready to fall," said Ed (Miller, 2016).

One major renovation they did was move one of the backdoors to face the other direction and build a back deck. By changing the layout of the backdoor, they were able to connect the entrances with the deck and create a beautiful addition to the houses. Although not original, it still upholds the integrity of the building.

While they worked on the physical structure of the building, Ed and Lynda also worked on maintaining the integrity of the staff houses, for example filling the houses back up with period

accurate furniture. They also added additional amenities, including bathrooms on the first floor in what was previously a butler's pantry. The stained glass in the windows surrounding the inside front door in both houses had been smashed, but they were able to rescue enough from both to restore one of the doors to its original appearance. For the other door, Ed took a stained glass class and "created a suitable replica from scratch" (Miller, 2016).



Fig #8. Back of the Cable Staff Houses, original back door locations. (Heritage NL, 2007)



Fig #9. Back of the Cable Staff Houses with connecting deck. (Heritage NL, 2017)

As a result of their work, Ed believed the house was "much the same as when the employees of the cable station lived there many years ago" (Miller, 2016). Although John Moss passed away sometime after 63782 Newfoundland and Labrador Limited took over the restoration, Ed said "He was quite proud of it... He was really pleased to see that it was done" (Miller, 2016). Following restoration and renovations, the Cable

Staff Houses opened their doors to the public in 2016 as a bed and breakfast (Miller, 2016).

Hank and Valerie Whelan

Just this past year Hank and Valerie Whelan purchased the Cable Staff Houses. After completing upgrades and maintenance to the houses and grounds, they opened the building as The Cable House Inn (www.thecablehouseinn.ca) in May of 2023. They have completed some small renovations and made upgrades for the bed and breakfast. Some future plans for the houses include repairing original windows, further restoration of original fireplaces, replacement of fence with traditional white paling style, displays of historical photos, and renovating the basements for use as functional spaces.



Fig #10. Image from The Cable House Inn website. (www.thecablehouseinn.ca)

History of the People in the Houses

Although we know a lot about the architectural history of the houses, it's important to look for the human side of the history as well. Some of the first residents of the houses were Sam Bailey, who lived in House #1, and Henry Mackenzie, who lived in House #2, in the late 1800s (Rowe, 113). They were employees of the Anglo-American Telegraph Company. At one point in their histories, House #1 was nicknamed "Sunny Brae" and House #2 was nicknamed "Mount Pleasant" (Rowe, 71).

Henry Mackenzie, born in 1847, was from Nova Scotia. By 1871 he was a telegrapher at the

Heart's Content cable station and remained employed there until 1899. In 1872 he married Mary Elizabeth Gardner, sister of Reverend George Gardner. The couple were the first people to occupy House #2 in 1882. McKenzie was a man who kept to himself but he was a member of the Masonic Lodge in Harbour Grace in 1880 (Notes from Ted Rowe to Valerie Whelan).

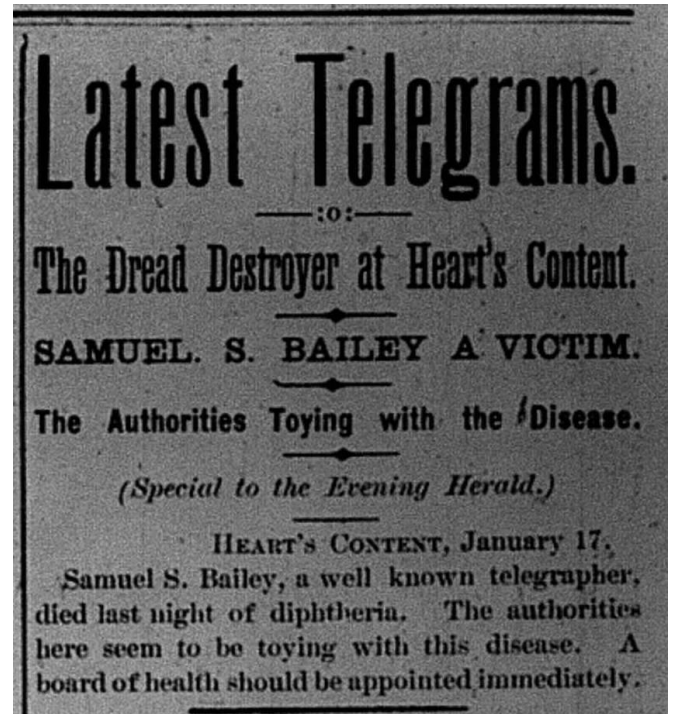


Fig #11. Sam Bailey's death notice and plea for action. (Evening Herald, January 17, 1890)

Sam Bailey, born in 1845, was from Oderin, Placentia Bay. Much is known about Sam Bailey through a large number of letters he wrote which are held at the Provincial Archives. Sam aspired to become a telegraph operator from an early age, eventually becoming a linesman and repairman on the trans-island telegraph line. During the long, lonely hours in the wilderness, he taught himself telegraphy and was hired at the Heart's Content station in 1868. In 1878, he married Elizabeth Rutherford, the daughter of a prominent Harbour Grace family. Elizabeth's sister married Superintendent Ezra Wheedon. Sam and Elizabeth had five children and were the first occupants of House #1 (Notes from Ted Rowe to Valerie Whelan).

In January of 1890, a few days after one of their children died from diphtheria, Sam also succumbed to the disease. His gravestone describes him as “honourable, upright, trustworthy and a favorite of many.” After Sam’s death, neighbour Henry Mackenzie was put in isolation for a few days as he had been in Sam’s presence just before he died (Notes from Ted Rowe to Valerie Whelan).

Wallace Rendell, a long time resident of Heart’s Content, grew up in Cable Staff House #1. He has memories of his parents having their friends in to have meals or drinks. Ted Rowe remembers that bridge was played at staff houses. Right up until 1955, playing cards was the main form of entertainment when residents invited friends over to staff houses. But once television came into town, they would invite their friends over to watch television. “Even if it was just the test pattern” remembers Rendell (Rendell and Rowe, 2016).

Hazel Rendell also grew up in one of the Cable Staff Houses and shared her memories of their grandeur. As she recalled, “The Company Houses were very spacious, of plaster finish, 10 foot high ceilings, most with design. There was a little fireplace in every room with marble mantles. Also a fireplace in a room in the basement. The bathroom was upstairs and the lavatory off a landing halfway up the stairs. Over this landing was a skylight, which brightened the stairs. Of course, we would slide down the banisters (twice with dire results!)” (Wilson, 2013).

When 63782 Newfoundland and Labrador Limited operated a bed and breakfast at the houses, many elderly people from the community revisited the houses. One gentleman told stories of his time in Heart’s Content and his memories in the house - “He lived there when he was a young boy up until he was 14 or 15 when his father died; his father was one of the head guys at the cable station. When his father died they had to leave the house - because if you didn’t work for the cable

company, you didn’t stay in the house,” Ed recalled from his chat with the gentleman (Miller, 2016).

Conclusion

A lot of the information about the building, restoration, and renovation of Cable Staff Houses #1 and #2 was already well-known. But through further research we uncovered some stories about the people who lived in them. We are always open to more information so don’t hesitate to reach out and contact us!

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