

## The Making of a Root Cellar



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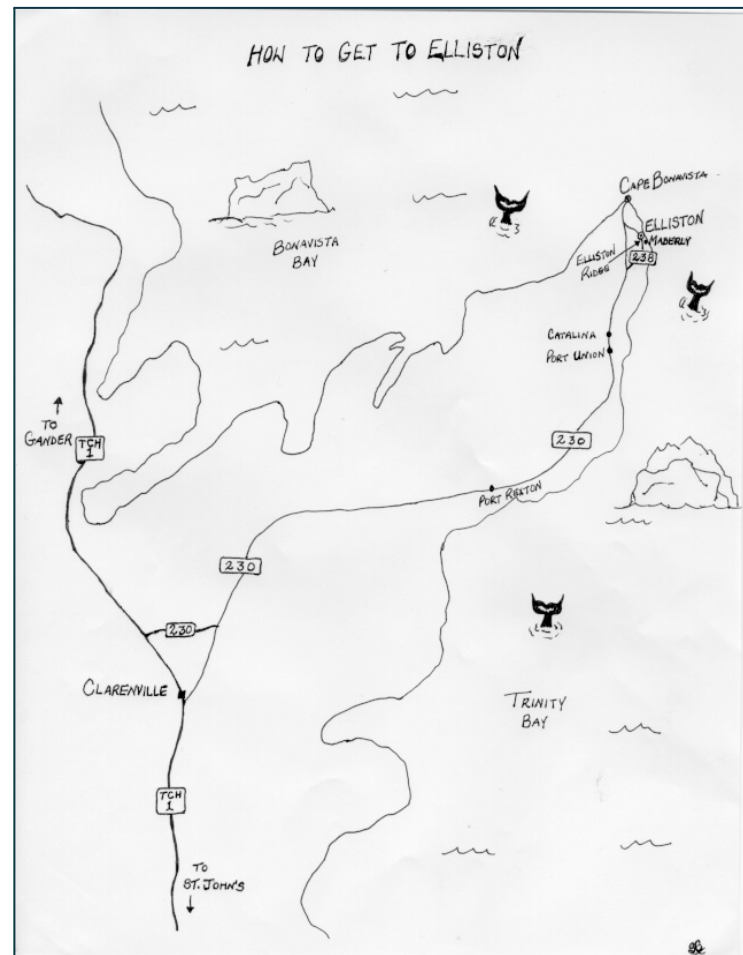
### Introduction

The focus of this report will be on the many root cellars that can be found in the Elliston/Maberly area. Over the last few months, the local tourism committee in Elliston has been promoting Elliston as the “Root Cellar Capital of Newfoundland.” I have heard the root cellars mentioned quite a few times in conversations with members of Tourism Elliston and with people in the local community. This left me wondering why the cellars were so attractive to tourists, and so I decided to learn more about them. I contacted Wanda Childs who I know had recently worked with Tourism Elliston as coordinator of a research project. She told me where to find information on this subject, and shared with me some of the findings that came from the research project.

In this paper, I will first try to explain exactly what a root cellar is, and where the idea of building these cellars came from. I will then discuss what the root cellars were used for and how they were built. Finally, I will attempt to explain how these root cellars can be used to attract tourists to this area.

### The Root Cellar and Where the Idea Came From

Elliston is a small community located on the tip of the Bonavista Peninsula. As can be seen in Figure 1.1, the nearest town in Bonavista, which is about five kilometres from Elliston. Elliston has a population of approximately 400 people, and there are 133 root cellars situated in this community (Childs 1999).



**Fig 1. Map of area Elliston area**  
(Courtesy of Sandra Chaulk)

A root cellar can be described as a structure that was built in the days before electricity in order to keep vegetables from freezing in the winter months (Childs 1999). There were three ways in which a cellar could be built: from the ground up, by digging a hole in the ground, or by digging out of a hill. These will be talked about in a later section of this paper.

It would seem that no one has yet figured out exactly where the idea of building root cellars came from. It is known that most of the people who settled on the East Coast of Newfoundland many years ago, came from England or Ireland. “Settlers in Elliston (Bird Island Cove) have roots that can be traced back to England, in particular Dorset, Devon, and Somerset” (Chaulk Murray 1979). From this it can be assumed that when these settlers came to Elliston, they brought the knowledge of the root cellars with them.

### What the Root Cellars Were Used For

Root cellars were widely used in many areas of Newfoundland, especially since most communities did not have electricity. There were two main reasons why the root cellars were used. The first purpose was to keep vegetables from freezing in the winter months, while the second was to keep vegetables cool during the summer months. “You go in there in the winter and you find that it’s warm, but you go in the summer, and it’s really cold, and it’s one temperature all the time. That’s how the vegetables keep” (Rex Chaulk 1998). It was obvious that the root cellars were used throughout the whole year.

Other than vegetables, people also kept a variety of food supplies in the root cellar. In the winter, salt meat, salt fish, and preserves were just a few of the items that could be found in the typical root cellar (Childs 1999). In the summer, everything from bread and butter to water was stored in the family’s root cellar (Stead 1998). In addition, it seems the men used the root cellars as a place in which to store their homemade wine and beer. In an interview with Anderson Chaulk (obtained from Tourism Elliston), he stated that “Father used to brew his blueberry wine and put it in the cellar until Christmas. By then, it would be perfect” (Anderson Chaulk 1998).

The root cellar was essential to the people living in Elliston from the time of settlement up until the time when electricity first came to this community. Elliston first received electrical power in the main part of town in the 1920’s, but the Maberly area did not have this service until the 1960’s (Childs 1998). However, even after people began using electric refrigerators, the root cellars were still used by some families.

Figure 2 is an example of a root cellar that is still being used in the Maberly area today. This particular cellar was built in 1859 and has only undergone a few renovations over the past 140 years (Childs 1998).

Apparently, the root cellar continues to be the best place to store your vegetables, especially if you still have a vegetable garden. Of the 133 root cellars that can be found in the Elliston area today, 19 of them are still used by their owners (Childs 1998).



**Fig 2. Photograph of an Elliston Root Cellar.**  
(Photo courtesy of Tourism Elliston)

### How the Root Cellars were Built

This section of the report is broken down into sub-sections in order to cover the different aspects of the construction of a root cellar.

#### Different Ways To Build A Root Cellar

As mentioned before, there were three ways in which root cellars were built. The first way was by digging down into the ground. Usually this involved a cellar underground with a shed built over it (Chaulk and Pearce 1998).

“Usually they would dig a hole in the ground. They would build a wooden frame around the hole and fill it with crushed stone or beach rock. Then, they would pour in the mortar (cement). When it was set, they would take the boards off.” (Tucker 1998)



This type of cellar was convenient in that you could go into it by using a trap door in the shed that was built over the root cellar.

A second way to build a root cellar was from the ground up. Some people built a cellar this way mainly because they didn't have a hill on their land, and they didn't want a cellar/shed type of root cellar. Figure 3 shows what this type of root cellar looks like.

As you can see by looking at this photo, the cellar was mainly built up from the ground using what seems like a wooden structure. Rock was then used, with sods put over the top and sides of the root cellar. Some of the advantages of building this type of cellar were that it was easier to excavate, and it was easier and cheaper to build (Durtschi 1999).



**Fig 3. Photograph of an Elliston Root Cellar.**  
(Courtesy of Tourism Elliston)

The third way in which root cellars were built seems to be the common way. This was by digging a hole out of the side of a hill. “The cellar was ordinarily a cave hollowed into the side of a hill, the outer walls of rock. The roof was a wooden framework covered with sods” (Chaulk Murray 1979).

Figure 4 shows an example of two such cellars located in the Maberly area. By driving through Elliston, one can see that this type of cellar is the most common, especially in the Maberly area of town. The main advantage to building the root cellar in this way was that “the cellar could be

graded so any water that should run or seep in will run out the door” (Durtschi 1999).



**Fig 4. Photograph of an Elliston Root Cellar.**  
(Courtesy Tourism Elliston)

In the next section, I will talk about the materials that were used by the men when they built the root cellars.

### Materials Used To Build Root Cellars

The materials that were available in the mid-1800's to the early 1900's to use to build a root cellar were very limited. From looking at the root cellars in Elliston, one can see that most of the older cellars were built using rocks, wood, mortar (cement), and sods. The newer ones, from the 1920's on, are mostly made out of concrete with sods put on top. All the root cellars that I saw had wooden doors. To show the materials used in building the older cellars, a part of an interview with Karl Hobbs (obtained from Tourism Elliston) is included in this report:

“Lime, sand and water were mixed with rock. Tarred paper was put between the rocks to keep both water and rodents out. The roof was made from round logs placed close together. Felt was then put over the logs. A ‘bedding’ of dirt and sods was placed on the felt. The roof had to be replaced every ten years. Cement was not used until the 1920's” (Hobbs 1998).

In addition to the materials mentioned above, a variety of other things were also used in the

building of the root cellar. Newspapers were sometimes used between the rocks, wire rings and bed springs were put in some for added support, and sand was used to make the mortar (Childs 1999).

Other materials could be found inside the cellar. Most, if not all of the cellars in Elliston had pins or pounds, in which to separate the vegetables. Shelves in which to put preserves were also common in the cellar. To keep vegetables from rotting, some people put a layer of sawdust or a layer of spruce boughs between the vegetables (Childs 1999).

The picture shown below, figure 5, shows the inside of a root cellar. By looking at the photo, you can see that this cellar had pins/pounds. Also seen in this picture, is a steel beam in the roof. The beam was taken from the ship, the “Eric”, which wrecked off of Elliston in the 1870’s (Childs 1999).

We will now look at what types of tools were used in building the root cellars.



**Fig 5. Interior of an Elliston Root Cellar.**  
(Courtesy Tourism Elliston)

### Tools Used In Building The Root Cellars

Most of the root cellars located in Elliston were built in a time where many of today’s fancier tools

were not available. The men in those times did not have the luxury of power saws or cement mixers. The tools that they did have were basic ones like picks, shovels, and crowbars. Wheelbarrows were used to move the rocks and sods. Other tools used by a few of the men were mauls (7 to 10 pounds), block and tackle, and wooden levels which “were not very good” (Murphy 1998). It seems that no other tools were used to build the root cellars, especially the more older ones.

### When Were The Cellars Built

This section describes what time of year, and the time of day that the cellars were usually built. The men would only have time to build a root cellar when they weren’t busy fishing or cutting wood. Since most of the fishing was from late spring until late fall, and most of the woodcutting was done during the fall and winter, the only time the men had a chance to build the root cellars was in early spring. “The cellars were built when we didn’t have nothing else to do. This was usually in the spring of the year, late at night” (Murphy 1998).

In most cases, the root cellars were built by more than one man (women, apparently, did not help build the cellars). “It would take a month for one man to build a cellar; from one to two weeks for four or five men” (Childs 1999). It’s possible that most men had help from the other males in their family, or from their friends.

If you look at the root cellars that are found in the Elliston/Maberly area, you will probably notice that most of them are around the same size. According to an interview with Clarence Murphy (obtained from Tourism Elliston), “a couple of old men went around showing other men how they built theirs” (Murphy 1998). It is sort of like building your own house and asking your father and uncles for help. The measurements they used for their own houses or cellars, would be what they would tell you to use. The older men probably also told the younger ones which way to face the root cellar doors. If possible, the root cellar door would go facing the east. The reason for this is that “an Eastern wind would not bring frost, it was cold, but not freezing” (Childs 1999). The less chance of frost getting into the cellar the better.





**Fig 6. Sandy Cove area of Elliston.**  
(Courtesy Tourism Elliston)

In the final section of this report, I will talk about the impact the root cellars could have on the tourists potential in the Elliston area, and for the Bonavista Peninsula as a whole.

### **Tourism and the Root Cellars**

I was first interested in the root cellar topic because of the way in which they could improve tourism in this area. Doing a Natural Resources Technology course, increased tourism could lead to possible employment for me as a tour guide or wildlife interpreter. Since Tourism Elliston has started its claim as “Root Cellar Capital of Newfoundland” they have seen more tourists come into this community. One fellow drove up from Maine in the United States last year, just to see the root cellars (Childs 1999). With the recent research project, Tourism Elliston is probably the only place in the province that can back up their claim of “Root Cellar Capital”.

Figure 6 shows the great scenery and beach that is located in the Sandy Cove area of Elliston. This along with the icebergs, whale watching, puffins, and root cellars makes Elliston a tourist attraction to any visitors to this area. Tourists to the Bonavista Peninsula usually make a point of visiting Trinity and the Bonavista Lighthouse among other things. Now they have the added option of viewing the root cellars in the Elliston Area.

The root cellars in Elliston/Maberly can lead to more and more tourists visiting our area. Tourism Elliston will soon be starting a project that will see some of the root cellars restored to their original condition, and they have developed walking tours so that the root cellars can be explained to tourists (Childs 1999).

Many other communities on the Bonavista Peninsula can also make use of the root cellars to increase tourism in their areas. When I was in King's Cove, for example, I noticed that a lot of the root cellars located in that area are mainly those of the underground variety, and are mostly constructed out of wood rather than rock and/or concrete. Further research can be done to compare the root cellars of Elliston with those of other communities on this peninsula. It would be interesting to see if they are built the same, or if they have lasted as long as the ones located in the Elliston area. By continuing to promote the root cellars, the community of Elliston will attract more and more tourists to this area and to the Peninsula as a whole.

## Conclusion

In this report, I have tried to provide some information on the root cellars located in the Elliston/Maberly area of the Bonavista Peninsula. I first explained what a root cellar is and how the idea to build them was probably brought over with the settlers from parts of England. I then described what the root cellars were used for and the different things that went into making a root cellar. Finally, I talked about the effect the root cellars have on tourism in this area. It is recommended that further research be carried out on the root cellars, especially in other communities on the Bonavista Peninsula.

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