

The Provincial Archives of Newfoundland

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Archives

Provincial Archives of Newfoundland

Prior to 1729 there was no government of Newfoundland, only regulations made by the British government for the protection of their Newfoundland fisheries. The basic intent of those regulations was to create a favourable flow of trade for Britain and to train sailors for the British navy. But, while fishermen were supposed to leave at the end of the summer operations, there gradually developed a year-round resident population, living without the benefit of law or government. Numerous problems were created by this society and by conflicts in the summer fishery — disputes over fishing rooms, plantations, debts, wages and competition between the residents and transatlantic fishermen on the one hand and, on the other, between the various fishermen and the troops stationed at the British garrisons on the island, who, contrary to regulations, often engaged in the fishery. Those problems came to a head in 1728 with the confrontation between the garrison at Placentia and the fishermen in the area.¹ The Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations were forced to take effective action and the Privy Council ordered the institution of a civil government at St. John's.² Thus local government was inaugurated and supplied the impetus for keeping local records. Lord Vere Beauclerk, Convoy Commander, had established a precedent: his orders, regulations, rulings, etc. were entered into a book which he left ". . . sealed up with one of the principal inhabitants to be delivered to the next officer that shall come after me that he may know what I did and my reasons for so doing . . ." If such records had been kept since the beginning, Beauclerk argued, there would not have been so many disputes over the ownership of property.³

1 Duke of Newcastle to the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations, 18 October 1728, CO 194/8, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland [hereafter cited as PAN].

2 Proceedings of the Committee of the Privy Council for Trade and Plantations, 30 April 1729, *ibid.*

3 Beauclerk to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, 29 August 1728, enclosed in Newcastle to the Governor of Placentia, 18 October 1728, CO 324/36, PAN.

Unfortunately the first twenty years of those records have not survived, either through neglect of Beauclerk's advice or, more likely, for want of a good safe place in which to keep them. Our local records begin with Governor George Bridges Rodney in 1749. In the post-1749 period some Governors took the record books back with them to England to be turned over to their successors on the way out in the spring; others did as Beauclerk had done — left them with some of the principal inhabitants, usually the Chief Justice after 1795. But, in spite of the fact that no Governor remained the year round until 1818 and no permanent Government House existed until 1827, these records have survived relatively intact. In 1825 the arrival of Governor Cochrane brought significant changes in the quantity and custody of the records. The overwhelming majority of functions documented by the local records were transferred to the Colonial Secretary, who immediately began a new filing system by separating the outgoing and incoming correspondence, a system retained until the restructuring of government departments in 1898. Thereafter, the entire Colonial Secretary's correspondence was integrated into a subject-numeric system, while he continued to keep a separate file for the routine, outgoing departmental correspondence as well as a separate file of correspondence with the Governor. The year 1825 also saw the beginning of the preservation locally of the Governor's correspondence to and from the Colonial Office. Thus originals of Colonial Office records, series 194 and 195, are relatively intact from 1825 onwards and are now in the custody of the Provincial Archives in St. John's.

Records were preserved for a functional purpose rather than from an awareness of any possible historical value. As Beauclerk had pointed out, the multiplicity of disputes arising from the fishery necessitated the keeping of some kind of record. For this reason the precolonial records (1749-1824) largely document disputes between fishermen, planters and merchants over debts, non-payment of wages, etc. Most of them center around the centuries old, but most crucial problem in the Newfoundland fisheries — the ownership and/or use of plantations and fishing rooms. This problem had been traditionally regulated by the time honoured 'squatters' rights' principle which gave a particular spot on the 'beach' for the use of the fishery to the first person to claim it. This naturally gave rise to numerous disputes and it was a long-standing quarrel of just such a nature at Placentia that supplied the impetus for the eventual creation of some kind of local government in 1729. After 1749, numerous complaints on these subjects, as well as the subsequent actions taken, are documented in the local Records Books. These, petitions for grants of land for houses, fishing rooms, etc., and the proceedings of the Court of Oyer and Terminer (which appear after 1750) form the bulk of the records of this period. Next in quantity are the returns of troops and stores at the various garrisons and fortifications around the Island, together with Commissions issued and licenses sold. These form the bulk of the records until 1825.

In 1825, when the Colonial Secretary assumed many of the functions previously carried on by the Governor's Office, continuity was maintained by his appropriation of the local records. To establish some control over these records, which had now reached the extent of 35 volumes, a clerk of the Executive Council prepared registers of the correspondence for the entire pre-1825 period. (To this date they are the only finding aids for these letter books.) After 1827, these records were stored in the relatively secure, stone structure of Government House. Later in the nineteenth century the Colonial Secretary and his records moved into the Colonial Building and from there to the new Supreme Court Building after its completion in 1904". These historical records were always in danger of destruction, especially when the need for more office space became critical. Their existence depended on their being out of sight in the roomy basement at spacious Government House and on the good graces of the few efficient Governors who have resided there. One of these was Alexander Harris. In 1919 he began to apply the records scheduling practices of the Public Records Office to the records at Government House as well as to organize and arrange what was selected to be permanently retained.⁴ Largely due to his efforts the records of the post-1825 period were in such good order when they were transferred to the Newfoundland Archives in the 1950's.

Awareness of the need for legislation embracing the management of the public records was very slow in coming to the Newfoundland Government. With the administrative restructuring of 1898, the Colonial Secretary became responsible for most of the 'State' records and papers,⁵ which responsibility was transferred to the Department of Home Affairs in 1934 and, after Confederation, to the Department of Provincial Affairs in 1949. This responsibility was never clearly defined and apparently referred only to the physical custody and security of the old records. Thus, when Newfoundland became a province of Canada in 1949, there was still no central direction and control over the current, dormant, and historical records of the province. After several unsuccessful attempts to legislate on this subject the Smallwood Government finally established the Newfoundland Archives under the Historic Objects, Sites and Records Act of 1959, which empowered the Archives to acquire any ". . . paintings, documents, books, papers, records, maps, drawings . . . which are considered to be of historical value" ⁶ As authorized under the Act, a Board of Trustees of Historic Objects, Sites and Records was appointed, and the first Provincial Archivist, A. M. Fraser, was appointed shortly afterwards. The Newfoundland Archives then opened offices in the vacated Colonial Building.

4 See Records at Government House, Series 3, File #159/19, PAN.

5 Statutes of Newfoundland, 1898, 61 Victoria, cap. 17.

6 Statutes of Newfoundland, 1959, Act #76, Sec. 12 (V).

The next 13 years saw failures in many areas. The Archives was impeded in its operations through lack of money both for personnel and for acquisitions of historical manuscripts from private sources. The most glaring failure was the limited scope of the Historic Objects, Sites and Records Act, which extended to but a small fraction of the public records — those of permanent historical value — while the great mass of the current and dormant records were excluded from its purview. This serious deficiency was eliminated in 1973 when the Act embraced “all matters . . . relating to the management of the public records of the province . . .”⁷ The management of the current, dormant and historical records of the Province of Newfoundland is now part of an integrated system administered by the Department of Tourism. There only remains the task of committing the monies for the acquisition of adequate space and personnel.

The following is a brief list of the principal collections of the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland:

Government Records:

- GN1 — Governor’s Office: Series 1 — Despatches to the Colonial Office, 1818, 1823-1935. Originals. 32 feet. Series 2 — Despatches from the Colonial Office, 1825-1939. Originals. 89 feet. Series 3 — Local Correspondence, 1850-1933. Originals. 62 feet. Series 4 — Local Fishery Correspondence, 1896-1898, 1905-1909. Originals. 26 inches. Series 5 — Foreign Correspondence, 1825-1826, 1829-1830, 1836-1838. Originals. 5 inches. Series 6 — Paper relating to the Royal Visits of 1901, 1914. Originals. 8 inches. Series 7 — Papers of Colonial Conferences, 1887, 1923, 1926. Originals. 5 inches.
- GN9 — Minutes of the Executive Council, 1825-1900, 1915-1934 and Memoranda of Proceedings, 1864-1890. Originals. 2 1/2 feet.
- GN8 — Files of the Office of the Prime Minister, 1908-1934. Originals. 9 feet.
- GN37 — Court Records of Newfoundland, 1753/1945. Originals. 55 feet.
- GN2 — Department of the Colonial Secretary: Series 1 — Outgoing Correspondence, 1749-1864, 1867-1934. 223 volumes. Originals. 47 feet. Series 2 — Incoming Correspondence, 1825-1859, 1863-1864, 1866-1868, 1870-1875, 1878-1890. Originals. 21 feet. Series 3 — Correspondence with the Legislature, 1832-1856. Originals. 7 inches. Series 4 — Telegrams, 1897-1933. 12 volumes. Originals. 28 inches. Series 5 — Special Files, 1903-1933. Originals. 26 feet. Series 6 — Correspondence with the Governor, 1892-1894, 1899-1918, 1924-1925, 1927-1930. Originals. 40 inches. Series 7 — Voters’ Lists. Originals. 27 inches. Series 8 — Proclamations, 1846-1890, 1896-1943, 1951-1955. Originals. 6 feet. Series 9 — Railway

⁷ *Ibid.*, Act #85, Sec. 21 (1).

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Correspondence, 1890-1918. Originals. 3 feet. Series 10 — Patents/Commissions, 1836-1852, 1876-1895, 1898-1933. Originals. 1 1/2 feet. Series 11 — Correspondence from the Government Engineer, 1893-1897. Originals. 10 inches. Series 12 — Correspondence re: erection, operation and maintenance etc. of the Nfld. Graving Dock, 1882-1893. Originals. 5 inches. Series 13 — Correspondence from Postmaster General, 1897-1898. Originals. 5 inches. Series 14 — World War 1 Correspondence 1912-1921. Originals. 8 feet. Series 15 — Non-Series Records — 15 inches. Series 16 — Election Correspondence, 1856-1932. Originals. 10 inches. Series 17 — Quarantine Letters, 1832-1836. Originals. 5 inches. Series 18 — Registrar General's Letters 1892-1893. Originals. 3 inches. Series 19 — Correspondence re Administration of Local Affairs, 1834-1836, 1843-1849. Originals. 4 inches. Series 20 — Financial Records, 1828-1834, 1908-1918. Originals. 9 inches. Series 21 — Correspondence from the Nfld Constabulary, 1892-1898. Originals. 3 inches. Series 22 — Reports and Petitions, 1870-1871, 1873-1898. Originals. 7 feet.

Private Records

Businesses: Slade & Sons. Fish Merchants, Fogo, Trinity, Catalina & Battle Harbour: ledgers, day books, & letter books, 1782/1878. Originals. 19 feet. Newman, Hunt & Co., Merchants, Dartmouth, Oporto & St. John's; Records of the Company's operations on the South Coast of Newfoundland, mainly letter books, ledgers, & journals, 1775/1884. Microfilm. 40 reels. Baine Johnston & Sons, General Dealers, St. John's (The post-1900 records of this firm have recently been acquired and have not yet been accessioned).

Organizations: The St. John's Chamber of Commerce: files of the Chamber, 1834-1841, 1846-1893. Originals. 2 1/2 feet. The Newfoundland Board of Trade, St. John's; files of the Board 1909-1954. Originals. 23 feet. The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, London: 'A' Manuscripts — Letters Received, 1702-1737; 'B' Manuscripts — Letters received from North America, 1702-1709; 'C' Manuscripts — Letters received from British North America, 1752-1858; 'D' Manuscripts — Letters record, 1850-1874; 'E' Manuscripts — Entry Books, Newfoundland, 1842-1889; 'X' Manuscripts, Correspondence of Upper Canada Clergy Society, 1836-1847. Microfilm. 55 reels. Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, London; Records, mainly incoming Correspondence, 1800-1867. Microfilm. 22 reels. The Colonial and Continental Church Society, London, Minute Books & Annual Reports of the Society and its predecessors the Newfoundland School Society and the Colonial Church Society, 1823-1872. Microfilm. 10 reels. The Patriotic Association of Newfoundland. Files (Correspondence, Minutes, Reports) 1914/1949. Originals. 1 1/2 feet.

Churches: For the past year the Archives have been photocopying Parish Registers and to date those for the Anglican United and Roman Catholic Parishes on the East Coast, Avalon and Burin Peninsulas are almost completed.

Personal Collections: Sir John T. Duckworth, Governor of Newfoundland, papers, 1810-1812. Originals. 5 feet. Sir Thomas J. Cochrane, Governor of Newfoundland 1825-1833; private and official papers of Governor Cochrane and his father Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, 1779-1856. Microfilm. 8 reels. The Job Family, Merchants, St. John's; personal and business, 1761-1952. Originals. 20 inches. Sir Wilfrid Grenfell, Medical Missionary; papers, 1877-1940. Microfilm. 4 reels. 342 feet. James P. Howley, Geologist; papers, mainly relating to Geological Surveys of Newfoundland, 1871-1921. Originals. 15 inches. T.B. Browning, Lawyer and Litterateur; papers, 1916-1923. Originals. 1 foot. P.K. Devine, Book-Jobber & Printer, St. John's, personal papers, 1879-1960. Originals. 4 feet.

Newspapers: An extensive collection of Newspaper Files of the 19th and 20th centuries, mainly post-1850 but several dating back to 1816 and one newspaper to 1810.

Photographs: Approximately 10,000 non-inventoried, non-indexed, un-assorted glass negatives and prints of the post-1880 period.

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