

Government House and Grounds

Overview Assessment

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In the summer of 2021, I completed an Overview Assessment of Government House grounds and adjacent properties in St. John's, for the Provincial Archaeology Office [PAO] under the Directed Research Program. Numbering among the oldest historic properties in St. John's, and as the official residence of the Governors (and later Lieutenant Governors) of Newfoundland, this building and its surrounding property are important historic resources, locally, provincially, and nationally. As a National Historic Site of Canada, Government House has been commemorated for its historical associations, its architectural design, and for its landscaped 22-acre grounds.

In response to proposed landscaping work on Government House grounds, an Overview Assessment and walking survey of the grounds (Permit 21.53) were completed to identify and evaluate the potential for archaeological and historical resources on Government House grounds and for adjacent properties located outside its formal boundaries (Crompton 2021).

Background History

Historically, the lands occupied by Government House had been known as the Barrens, and which had been reserved for Ordnance use since the eighteenth century. Most of these lands had been used for farming and gardening, with the exception of a Garrison Hospital, which had been constructed in 1805 and occupied the southwestern portion of what is now Government House grounds. The Garrison Hospital was a 3-bayed structure of 80 feet long by 30 feet wide (Wyatt and Reilly 1830, July 16). A Surgeon's garden lay to the south of the hospital grounds, and to the north of the hospital itself lay three small buildings- one unlabelled (possibly a privy), stables, and a guardhouse. The Garrison Hospital likely remained the only building in the area until Government House construction crews arrived in 1827 (See PAO & B. Temple, this volume for more).

Plans for the construction of a New Government House were started in earnest in 1825 with the

arrival of Governor Sir Thomas Cochrane. This was a watershed moment in Newfoundland's colonial history. For the first time, Newfoundland was to be a formal colony with a civilian Governor. This event ended the long rule of Naval Admirals, and ushered in legal reforms and eventually electoral representation (Bannister 2017). Little wonder that a new approach to governing Newfoundland gave way to new means of representing governmental authority, in the form of a New Government House. Additionally, Old Government House at Fort Townshend was described by both Cochrane and local Ordnance officers alike as in a perilous and uninhabitable state, meaning that building a New Government House became a priority.

Construction began in 1827, after two years of negotiating plans and costing estimates. Costs quickly spiralled upwards, because of errors in compiling estimates, rising labour and materials costs, and as Cochrane continued to alter the plans of the house and grounds while construction was ongoing. By the time Government House was completed in June of 1831, the original estimate of £8,778 had ballooned to a final cost of some £38,000—an extraordinary cost overrun. While the house was built of solid stone materials, and had very good interior accommodations particularly for its public functions, it had been built at enormous expense. It was said to be too large and expensive for the comfort of subsequent Governors, its site too unsheltered and exposed, and “not possessed of any exterior architectural beauties, does not much ornament the capital” (Bonnycastle 1842). Nevertheless, it was finished, and has been continually occupied by Governors (and later Lieutenant Governors) ever since.

Overview Assessment Results

After a thorough search of archival documents, maps, and secondary literature, it is clear that Government House and the layout of its grounds are a remarkable historical survival. The house itself remains as an excellent example of Palladian-style construction, built with a combination of local and imported stone;



Figure 1: Government House to southeast, as seen from the treed landscape of the north lawn. Photo by author.

many of its interior furnishings also remain intact (Figure 1). Broadly speaking, and with a few notable exceptions, the general layout of the grounds has also remained the same since the 19th century. The lands to the south of the house is a formal garden today, and have remained so since construction of the house was completed, with tree plantings started fairly early on and serpentine pathways in place since the 1850s. The Glass Conservatory beside Government House was built sometime before 1872, and still stands in the same location today.

The area immediately to the north of the house has likewise been used for decorative tree plantings since its earliest years, with wandering pathways variously laid through the plantings. Further to the north, fields and kitchen gardens much in the same location as the current fields and garden area is today occupied the lands. The Royal Newfoundland Constabulary's horse stables are in the same location as stables constructed by the early 1840s. The West Lodge and East Lodge gatehouses first appear on maps of the property drawn up in 1830, though the present buildings have been much altered and renovated in the ensuing years. The Gardeners House, first appearing on a map of 1879, shows a building much in the same shape and location as the current building today, standing alongside Bannerman Road. Though borders have been altered, and property lines (particularly on the King's Bridge Road side) have

shifted, the overall functional layout of Government House and its grounds are much the same today as they were in the nineteenth century.

However, some changes to the grounds were uncovered in archival sources. For example, the Old Garrison Hospital remained in use until the 1850s, and was finally sold and demolished sometime between 1852 and 1857. The Garrison Hospital site appears to have been used only as a field in subsequent years (Crompton 2021).

Some new constructions also changed the Government House landscape. For example, by 1915 a tennis court had been constructed to the north of the house (Figure 2). Then-Governor Davidson's personal diaries contain several references to his daughters Diana and Daphne learning to skate on the tennis court when the lawn flooded and froze in the winter (Davidson 1915, January 27-28).

In 1881, a four-sided stone, resembling a survey benchmark was installed near the corner of Bannerman and Circular Roads. Though references to the installation of survey monuments were not uncovered in the archival sources consulted, it does seem most likely that the stone was one of a series used to mark the boundaries of Government House by the Newfoundland Government. It may well have been part of a move to understand and codify existing boundaries in the local landscape, particularly in a time when the immediate landscape was changing. The British

Imperial garrisons were withdrawn from Newfoundland in 1870, and as a result, existing Ordnance properties such as Commissariat House and the Commanding Engineer’s Residence (#21 King’s Bridge Road) were adapted to other uses. Additionally, work was underway to open Bannerman Park (which had been Government House land, and was later provided for the park). Perhaps the need to mark the boundaries of Government House grounds with boundary stones was a result of changes in land tenure occurring around its boundaries.

Pathways through the grounds were sometimes altered. For example, Governor Davidson wrote that his best achievement in Government House grounds was the installation of a broad straight walkway topped with comminuted seashells, which he obtained from the ballast of fishing schooners that arrived from Labrador. Prisoners from the Penitentiary completed the pathway work; he records that the prisoners worked enthusiastically when he told them he would name the pathway “Pennsylvania Avenue” in honor of their hard work (Davidson 1917, April 30). Other constructions or alterations to the grounds included the construction of wells, water pipes, drains, the installation of electrical lines, and the erection of a summerhouse, the locations of which are not well documented in contemporary maps or documents.

Plantings of gardens and trees varied by Governors through the years. Generally, each Governor sought to make alterations to the grounds in terms of plantings and garden arrangements, though some were more enthusiastic gardeners than others. During the First World War period, the landscape designer Rudolf H.K. Cochius (one of the designers of Bowring Park) visited the grounds and made suggestions for redesigned plantings, for example. Later, Governor Harris wrote that he had gone to a great deal of trouble and expense in replanting parts of the grounds, improving garden layouts and arrangements so that they would be a permanent credit to the colony. “A good deal of money had apparently been thrown away upon ill-judged planting (and in this climate the planting of trees requires very great judgment) and recently goats and other animals had been allowed to run about the grounds and destroy the attempts which had been previously made” (Harris 1921, February 10, 1921, February 18). From this point onwards, a Public Works department Inspector for Government House remained responsible for overseeing work on the grounds, to ensure continuity of care for the grounds and to prevent future neglect.

Other changes to the landscape include the construction of a World War II anti-aircraft gun battery, bearing a Bofors gun and a nearby structure installed by the Canadian Army. The gun emplacement had been removed by 1946. A Government House

Figure 2: The flat area at the centre of this photo is the early twentieth century tennis court. Photo by author.





Figure 3: The uneven ground at the centre of this photo likely represents the location of the Old Garrison Hospital.
Photo to southwest, taken by author.

caretaker had used the structure in the post-war period for a few years after, though beyond this its use remains unclear.

Recommendations

Despite some changes in land-use, Government House and its grounds remain a remarkably intact survival of nineteenth century formal architecture and garden/landscape planning. In most cases, the existing footprint of historic structures on the grounds remains in situ, and monitoring of any work around these buildings should be undertaken as a matter of course, as each structure may have unrecorded outbuildings and/or garden structures nearby. Most of the remaining landscapes of Government House are agricultural or botanical in nature. As active landscapes, which are integral to the commemorative integrity of this National Historic site, these landscapes should be developed sensitively, in keeping with their historic character. Given the association of these grounds with historic garden parties, receptions, and outdoors pursuits (such as the tennis grounds), careful development of these areas, in keeping with their historic character, might be factored into future plans.

Two areas of Government House grounds were designated as areas with high potential to produce subsurface historic resources: the Old Garrison Hospital grounds and the World War II Battery. At the time of writing the Overview Assessment, the

precise location of the hospital building and its associated outbuildings were currently unknown, within the general area to the west of Government House. Undulations on the ground surface noted during the walking survey suggested a potential location (Figure 3). Furthermore, only a limited number of historical sources documenting daily life at the hospital were uncovered in the course of Overview Assessment research, meaning that archaeological remains will tell the majority of the story at this site. Additionally, though no evidence of a hospital graveyard was uncovered, the risk of uncovering stray human remains at this site is a possibility, as the work of surgeons in the hospital would almost certainly have produced body parts in need of disposal (Crompton 2021). For all of these reasons, a cautious approach to any future development in the area is recommended, as well as the use of non-invasive subsurface imaging and excavation to locate extant historical resources.

The second area of very high potential for subsurface remains is the 1945 Bofors Gun emplacement and associated dwelling (Figure 4). These structures are no longer visible on the surface and so this area should be monitored closely during any development of the area. The gun itself was removed following the war—and so, too, one hopes, was any unused ordnance. For the time being, subsurface disturbance is not recommended, as the site is listed with the De-



Figure 4: The area (facing west) at the corner of Bannerman and Circular Roads is the location of the World War II Bofors Gun site.

partment of National Defence as an unassessed site that might bear Unexploded Ordnance (UXO). The status of the Department of National Defence assessment should be investigated prior to any subsurface disturbance or development in this area.

Government House is an important example of 19th century formal architectural design. Though the residence remains the most visually impressive part of the site, Government House is recognized for more than just the construction of the building itself—the grounds are every bit as important as the structure. To this end, considerable effort was under-

taken to evaluate the history and potential historical resources for each part of the Government House grounds area. Government House and its grounds are, and continue to be, a significant historical site in St. John's, representing a key node in the history of the city, both civically, provincially, and nationally.

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