

Newfoundland

Signal Hill National Historic Park



Brief History

What to look for

Brief History

Signal Hill, a natural lookout commanding the approaches to St. John's harbour played a significant role in the history of Newfoundland. Although the island became a military stronghold in the 1790's, Vikings probably landed as early as the 10th century, when they were carried there by wind and current.

Later, the island's existence was common knowledge among European fishermen, who called the land on their maps *Baccalaos* (cod) in tribute to the silvery fish which drew them across the Atlantic Ocean.

Fishing expeditions were greatly encouraged by the voyages of exploration at the end of the 15th century. John Cabot from England in 1497 and 1498, and Jacques Cartier, from France in 1534, acclaimed the natural wealth of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland.

As the fishing industry grew its methods changed. Fleets had been leaving Europe in the spring and returning in the autumn, but in the 16th century some fishermen began to winter in Newfoundland, building small settlements along the coast. The French settled around Placentia and the English near St. John's. Even without the support of their governments these first colonists felt the areas they occupied belonged to their countries and they undertook to fortify their settlements. It was an era of commercial rivalry among powerful fishing merchants in Europe, as well as rivalry among nations. The colonists in Newfoundland were often at the mercy of freebooters and punitive expeditions sent out by the fishing firms to discourage settlement and destroy each other's bases of operation.

The European attitude of indifference to the well-being of the settlers gradually changed in the 17th century, beginning with the official colonization of Placentia by the French in 1662. By 1700 the English government had built a number of small fortifications to protect the narrows and inner harbour of St. John's. No defensive works were built on Signal Hill, although the Hill



was used as a signalling station. To alert the town, cannons were fired at the approach of enemy or friendly ships heading for St. John's or neighbouring Quidi Vidi.

Unfortunately the warning system and new defences proved ineffective against d'Iberville's expedition during the winter of 1696-97. The French force captured most of the English settlements on the Avalon peninsula, including St. John's.

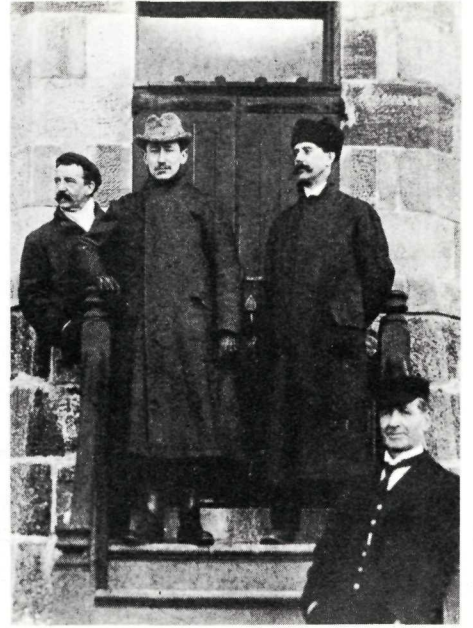
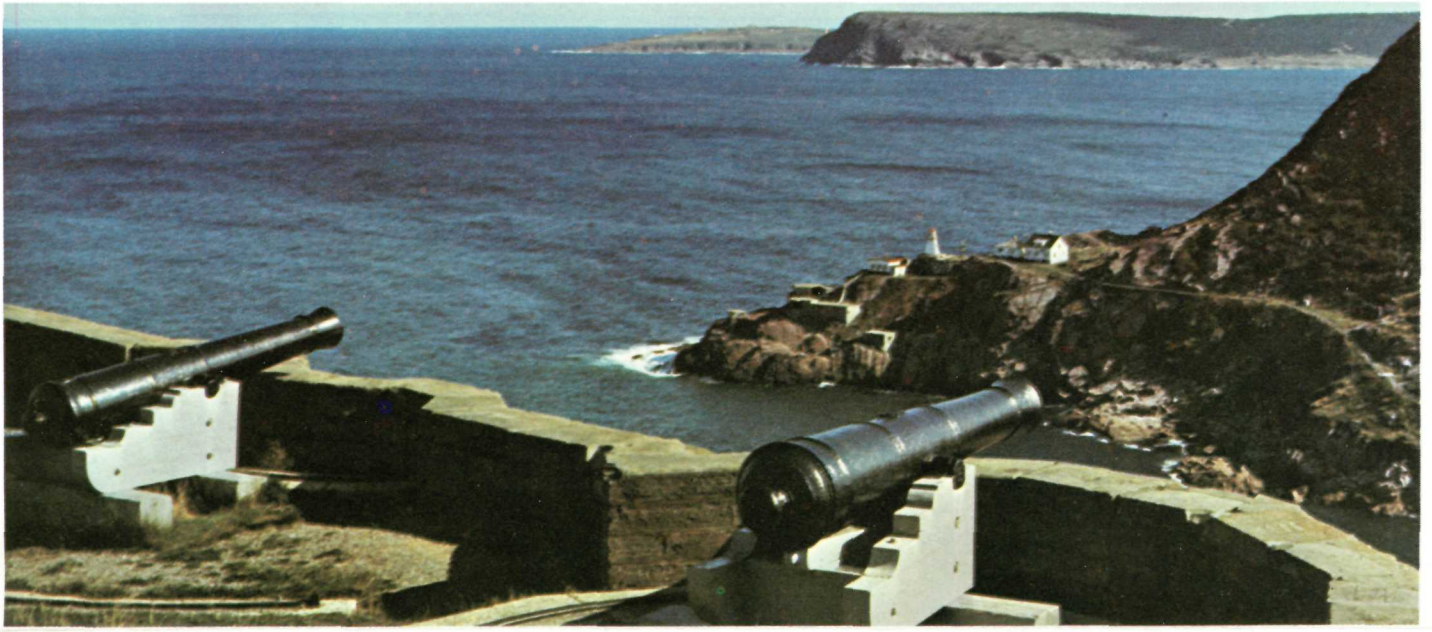
After a hastily dispatched fleet from England re-captured the ravaged territory, Forts William and George were built to fortify St. John's harbour. A reassessment of the defences did not occur until after the harbour had been re-captured by the French on New Year's Day, 1709. The victor, the Sieur of St. Ovide, destroyed the fortifications and left the Island. Obviously, stronger defences were required, but fortifying Signal Hill was still thought impractical.

By the Treaty of Utrecht, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-

1713), France was permitted to continue fishing off Newfoundland, but the island became England's property.

During the Seven Years' War between France and England (1756-63), France experienced a number of severe reverses in North America. To recoup some of her territorial losses an expedition was dispatched from Brest, France, in May 1762 to capture Newfoundland. In June 1762 St. John's fell easily to the combined forces of 1,500 men under the Comte d'Haussonville, and two ships of the line and two frigates commanded by Captain de Ternay. The French then began to repair the ruined defences and to add new ones on Signal Hill.

Meanwhile, the British made counter-preparations. A blockade set up by Lord Colville, commander of the English forces in North America, was joined in September by a large force from England under Lieutenant-Colonel William Amherst. The British troops landed at Torbay, north of St. John's, and marched southward driving back the



Marconi and Assistants, Cabot Tower

French from their outposts. By daylight on September 12, the British had assaulted and carried Signal Hill. The guns there were trained on the French garrison in St. John's, and eight days later the French surrendered.

Amherst, who conducted the land operations in the re-capture of St. John's, described the strategic possibilities of "the most advantageous ground I ever saw . . . really, almost incredible" and immediate measures were taken to improve St. John's defences. A mast and yardarm were constructed for flag signalling, and chains were stretched across the harbour entrance to keep out enemy ships.

Although several wooden batteries were constructed to supplement the chains, they fell into disrepair almost immediately. And under the lash of fierce Atlantic storms the fortifications at St. John's deteriorated quickly. However, the British were unwilling to build stone fortifications or to pay for the upkeep of wooden ones.

From the mid-1790's to the War of 1812, when it seemed the Western Atlantic might become the scene of major naval engagement between British, French, and Americans, the British focussed their attention on the protection of both the city and harbour of St. John's. Accordingly, several batteries, a blockhouse, barracks, storehouse, powder magazine, hot-shot furnaces, and a masonry wall were constructed on Signal Hill, earning for it the nickname Fort Impregnable. But the Royal Engineers decided the Hill needed further strengthening. In 1809 Lieutenant-Colonel E. W. Durnford submitted plans for a citadel to occupy the whole top of Signal Hill. Had his plans been followed, the ridge would have been strengthened and the harbour entrance securely protected.

After the Napoleonic Wars Britain was so confident of her mastery of the seas that Newfoundland's defences were neglected. By the 1850's, the fortifications on Signal Hill were allowed to fall into decay and the heights assumed their original function of a signalling platform.

When the adjacent Cabot Tower was constructed on Signal Hill to commemorate

the 1898 quad-centenary of Cabot's visit to Newfoundland's shores, one section of the tower was used as a visual signal station. Until 1958 it alerted port authorities, merchants and ship owners to the arrival and departure of vessels. The tower displayed the name and house flag of the approaching vessel, informing owners or agents of the arrival of their ships.

In 1901, Guglielmo Marconi selected Signal Hill for an experiment to demonstrate that signals could be transmitted by electromagnetic waves. On December 12 the letter "S" was transmitted by Morse code from Poldhu, Cornwall in England. Using a kite to hold an aerial aloft, Marconi received the three faint dots on his set to make communications history. The signal had travelled 1,700 miles.

Newfoundland became a vital link in North Atlantic communications during the Second World War. One of the main convoy routes supplying Britain with food and munitions ran between St. John's and Londonderry, Northern Ireland. The Newfoundland Escort Force accompanied convoys to Londonderry where crews would rest for a day before returning to St. John's harbour. Allied planes and ships in Newfoundland also played a significant role in protecting the North American continent from the enemy, and then wresting control of the Atlantic from him. Newfoundland-based bombers kept a constant watch for German surface craft and submarine packs patrolling the North Atlantic.

In 1949, Newfoundland ceased to be a British colony and became Canada's tenth province. Signal Hill was declared a National Historic Site in 1958.

What to look for

1. *Visitors' Reception and Interpretation Centre* features a sight and sound tour of the history of Newfoundland. From here foot paths lead to Gibbett Hill, Queen's Battery, Cabot Tower and Ladies Lookout.
2. *Gibbett Hill*. The British built Crow's Nest Battery here in 1696. The hill was named after the gibbet placed there in 1750 by the English. Victims of the gibbet were commonly guilty of murder, although even

petty theft could lead to execution under the laws of the 18th century.

3. *Queen's Battery*, commanding entrance to the Narrows, can be reached on foot or by car. The battery was built in 1796, but the present mountings probably date from the 1860's. Near the battery are the excavated ruins of British powder magazines, two barracks, latrine, ash pit and stockade wall.

4. *Chain Rock*, seen from Queen's Battery where a chain and log boom was stretched across the Narrows to keep out enemy ships in the early 1700's. A gun battery was placed on the rock in the 1670's to repel Dutch pirates. A gun emplacement used during both world wars remains.

5. *Cabot Tower*, built in 1897-98 to commemorate John Cabot's discovery of Newfoundland and Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The building, about 30 feet square with an octagonal 50-foot tower, houses a graphic exhibit of early signalling devices. On the deck roof of the building is a signal mast and crossarm of the type used to announce the approach of shipping.

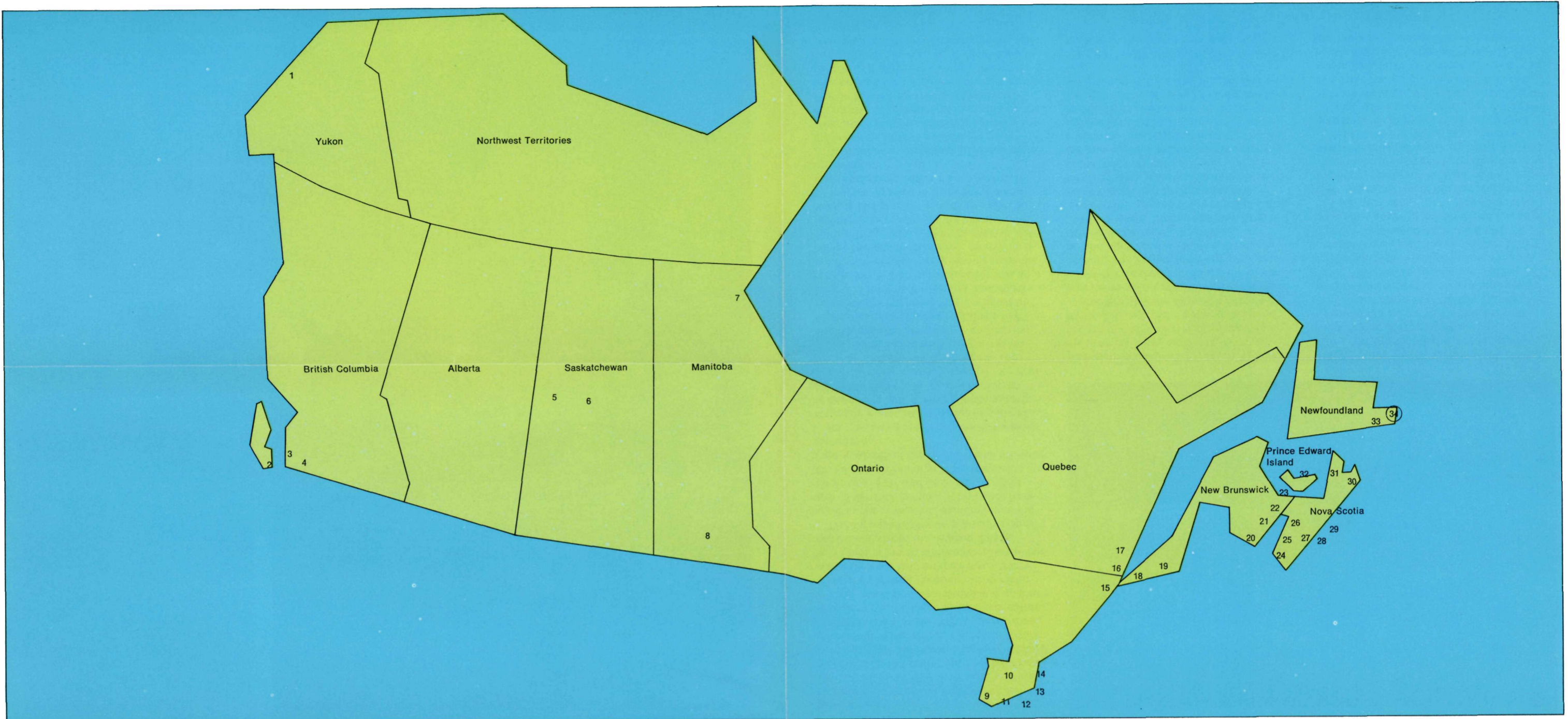
6. *British Admiralty records of the early 1800's* refer to the *daily noon firing* of a gun from a blockhouse on Signal Hill. St. John's residents still keep time from the sight and sound of the charge ignited every noon.

7. *Canadian Marconi Monument*, dedicated by the Canadian Marconi Company to the government and people of Newfoundland in honour of Guglielmo Marconi.

8. *Ross' Valley*. The faint outline of a small-pox hospital, which burned in 1911, can be seen at Ross' Valley from the Cabot Tower parking lot.

9. *Ladies Lookout*, named in 1702, is 525 feet above sea level. Along the path to Ladies Lookout are the excavated ruins of a canteen, ale storage hut, latrine and ash pit, part of the fortifications built by the British.

10. *George's Pond*, spring fed and 70 to 80 feet deep at the center, was first used as a water supply by the city of St. John's in the early 1800's. Today it is only an auxiliary supply.



National Historic Parks & Sites

- 1 Dawson City, (Yukon Territory) Centre of the Klondike Gold Rush. Palace Grand Theatre and riverboat S.S. Keno preserved as national historic sites.
- 2 Fort Rodd Hill, (British Columbia) Nineteenth century British coastal fortification with historic Fisgard Lighthouse nearby.
- 3 Vancouver, (British Columbia) The schooner, St. Roch, first vessel to navigate the Northwest Passage from West to East; built in 1928 for the R.C.M.P.'s Arctic patrol service; exhibited at the Vancouver Maritime Museum.
- 4 Fort Langley, (British Columbia) A partial reconstruction of palisaded Hudson's Bay Company post of 1850's.
- 5 Fort Battleford, (Saskatchewan) North West Mounted Police Post built in 1876 in the territory of the Cree Indians. Original buildings house interesting museum collection and are surrounded by a log stockade.
- 6 Batoche Rectory, (Saskatchewan) Headquarters of the Metis during the North West Rebellion of 1885 at Duck Lake.
- 7 Fort Prince of Wales, (Manitoba) The most northerly fortress on the North American continent built by the Hudson's Bay Company between 1733-1771. Opposite Churchill.
- 8 Lower Fort Garry, (Manitoba) Stone fort built by the Hudson's Bay Company between 1831-1839. Located on west bank of Red River about 20 miles north of Winnipeg.
- 9 Fort Malden, (Ontario) At Amherstburg, museum buildings, and earthworks of defence post first built in 1797-1799, destroyed by the Americans, 1813, rebuilt 1819-1823.
- 10 Woodside, (Ontario) At Kitchener, the boyhood home of William Lyon Mackenzie King, tenth prime minister of Canada.
- 11 "Navy-Hall", (Ontario) At Niagara-on-the-Lake, built in 1817 as commissariat store. Located on site of earlier naval compound, built 1775-1778; hence the traditional name "Navy Hall".

- 12 Fort George, (Ontario) At Niagara-on-the-Lake, main fortification built 1797-1801; reconstructed 1937-1940 by Niagara Parks Commission; declared National Historic Park, 1969.
- 13 Queenston Heights, (Ontario) Site of major American invasion, critical battle and American defeat during War of 1812. Monument to Major-General Isaac Brock killed during the repulse.
- 14 Bellevue House, (Ontario) At Kingston, home of the first prime minister of Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald.
- 15 Fort Wellington, (Ontario) At Prescott, defence post built between 1812-1814, with blockhouse dating from 1839, and museum.
- 16 Coteau-du-Lac, (Québec) Late 18th-century British military post and site of first canal on the St. Lawrence River at Coteau-du-Lac.
- 17 Sir Wilfrid Laurier's Birthplace, (Québec) House at St. Lin des Laurentides where Canada's seventh prime minister was probably born.
- 18 Fort Chambly, (Québec) Fort first built by French in 1665 was destroyed by fire and rebuilt between 1709-1711. It was occupied by the Americans and British. At Chambly, about 19 miles southeast of Montreal.
- 19 Fort Lennox, (Québec) On Ile-aux-Noix in the Richelieu River near St. Jean, an island fort, first built by the French in 1759, rebuilt by the British, 1776-1782. The present fort dates from 1819-1829.
- 20 St. Andrews Blockhouse, (New Brunswick) At St. Andrews, only remaining defence-work of a series of blockhouses and batteries built by civilians against American privateers.
- 21 Carleton Martello Tower, (New Brunswick) At Saint John, built during War of 1812. With the addition of a concrete superstructure, Tower became part of city's war defensive fire control center during World War II.
- 22 Fort Beauséjour, (New Brunswick) Site of major French fort in area, 1750-1755; captured by the British in 1755; defended against the Americans in 1776. Near Sackville.
- 23 Fort Gaspereau, (New Brunswick) Near Port Elgin on Baie Verte, square palisade with blockhouse at each corner, built by French in 1750 to defend Acadia (New Brunswick); burnt by British in 1756. Remains of parade square and ditch may be seen.
- 24 Port Royal, (Nova Scotia) Restoration of "Habitation" or first fort built in 1605 by Champlain, DeMonts and Poutrincourt.
- 25 Fort Anne, (Nova Scotia) At Annapolis Royal, well-preserved earthworks of fort built by the French, 1695-1708, and enlarged by the British, 1710-1750. The museum building is a reconstruction of the Officer's Quarters built in 1797.

- 26 Grand Pré, (Nova Scotia) Evangeline Chapel and museum stand near the village where the principal events in the expulsion of the Acadians took place.
- 27 Halifax Citadel, (Nova Scotia) Nineteenth-century stone fortress, one of the largest in North America, contains three spacious museums relating to Canada's naval, military and provincial history.
- 28 Prince of Wales Martello Tower, (Nova Scotia) At Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, built by British between 1796-1798. Modified in 1862 to provide powder magazine, armament, four machicolation galleries and parapet at roof level. Tower is last remaining example of this style of 19th-century fortification in Nova Scotia. Several exist in Quebec and Ontario.
- 29 York Redoubt, (Nova Scotia) Begun in 1793 by the British to defend the port of Halifax, it had a battery of eight 24-pounder guns. Remains of foundations for 30-foot stone martello tower and other defence-works built since 1798 may be seen. Most structures date from the 1880's when defences were modernized.
- 30 Fortress of Louisbourg, (Nova Scotia) The French outpost on the Atlantic coast built after 1713 Treaty of Utrecht. In 1720 work began on the defences and a sizeable town was built within its walls. Restoration of buildings and some massive defences reconstructed to the 18th-century period. About 23 miles south of Sydney.
- 31 Alexander Graham Bell Museum, (Nova Scotia) A large museum of original design at Baddeck contains extensive collection of relics of experiments in many scientific fields by Bell and his associates.
- 32 Fort Amherst, (Prince Edward Island) At Rocky Point across the harbour from Charlottetown, site of Port La Joye, French settlement of 1720, captured by the British in 1758. Earthworks of British fort built there still visible.
- 33 Castle Hill, (Newfoundland) Ruins of harbour fortifications begun by the French at Placentia about 1662. Interpretation centre.
- 34 Signal Hill, (Newfoundland) Rocky headland at entrance to St. John's harbour. Site of numerous early fortifications and the last battle during the Seven Years' War in North America. Includes John Cabot Memorial Tower.

