

Road Construction

Roads were vitally important for the development and prosperity of the early Newfoundland outports- transportation within the town as well as communication links with other communities would encourage trade and commerce. This was particularly true of Bird Island Cove which lacked a decent harbour and docking facilities. The construction of a five mile road to Bonavista would circumvent the loading and discharging of cargo from small sailing vessels in this turbulent and exposed cove.

Road construction in the early eighteen hundreds was a slow and labour intensive undertaking. All of the work was performed manually- the men felled trees, pulled stumps, moved boulders, filled in boggy areas with stone, and dug out small stones and gravel as surface material. The most primitive tools- picks, shovels, wheel barrows- were used.

The work was supervised by a government appointed local Road Board. Regulations governing the behaviour of the workforce were simple and direct (Tilley Collection, PANL P7/A/67.):

NOTICE

Is here by given that on Monday the 17th, inst. persons will be employed making a road across the Flowers Marsh at the rate of 4/- per day for each ablebodied man, and old men and boys in proportion. Labour to commence with the sun and end at the going down of the same. Let it be distinctly understood that any person who does not obey the Surveyor, and labour to his liking, will be forthwith discharged.

In 1843 Robert Carter, Conservative Member for Bonavista District, presented a petition to the House of Assembly on behalf of John Miles, and others, of Bird Island Cove requesting a grant to construct a road to Bonavista (Journal of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland, PANL J 125 K3.) In 1844 John Skelton, and others, of Bonavista requested funds to complete the road from Lance Cove to Bird Island Cove.²

This road originated on Coster Street, in Bonavista, and followed along a route to Spillar's Cove. From there, through a valley, it emerged on the North Side of Bird Island Cove near High Cliff. The route, for reasons now unknown, was called the Klondike Road. The surveyors' reports show that they were dissatisfied with the Spillar's Cove to Bird Island Cove route and, even during construction, were searching for alternatives:

...On the line of road leading from here to Bird Island Cove, to the service of which the sum of seventy pounds were appropriated, considerable improvement has been made on that portion of it leading thro' Coster Street, thence towards Middle Pond in the direction of Spillar's Cove as far as the same would avail for the purpose. The Spillar's Bridge over which the present road passes is of considerable height and very steep on either side where the road approaches it.

The Road Surveyor, Mr. A. Strathie, endeavoured to lead the road around the extreme of the Bridge or the eastern point thereof to avoid the steep ascent which never could be made available for general purposes, and after a fruitless search of many days was obliged to relinquish the attempt, being brought up almost at every ten paces by deep rents, gulches, precipices, and huge boulders heaped upon each other, or collected in groups by the mighty effort of some great convulsion of nature, the effects of which were more than sufficient to render a pass in that direction wholly impracticable. Upon his report and due examination of the ground, the Board was compelled to abandon all attempt at improvement beyond Middle Pond upon the old line, and therefore directed their Surveyor to examine the north side of the Ridge nearer Bonavista, and in doing so discovered a natural causeway commencing near Middle Pond and running up in a southerly direction towards a low hollow in the Ridge, and upon further investigation found to terminate at a valley which led in between two hills to the crown of that portion of the Ridge offering us on the north face of the Ridge a Road, when completed, practicable for every general purpose. A walk of a few minutes across the Ridge brought him in view of the settlement at Bird Island Cove, bearing from about S.S.E. distant one mile and a quarter only - a vale of considerable extent opening upon it from where he stood and continuing down to the waters edge. The causeway is about one and a quarter mile in extent from its rise at Middle Pond to its junction with the crown of that part of the Ridge - along the crown of this causeway the Board caused a new line to be thrown open, and also down through the vale on the other side in the direction of the settlement - and upon examination of the ground have every reason to be pleased with the alteration, inasmuch as it lessens the distance between the two places fully one and a half mile, and gives the public a short and easy access to either place. The descent into the vale is very gentle, and the ground is favourable for road making or for agricultural purposes. After winding through this vale it crosses the stream of water which divides the North from the South side of the settlement, and which falls into the sea at the foot of Crawler's Hill, over which the old road leads, a most difficult and dangerous pass in the winter season. To avoid this difficulty, the line after crossing the stream above the settlement bends more Southerly, leading thro' a valley at the back or South-west of that hill, from whence it emerges and enters the settlement between the Church and Wesleyan Chapel, 3 1/4 miles distant from Bonavista...²

This proposed route eventually became the main road from Bonavista to Elliston. Within the town, unlike the road today, it ran from Norder Cove, up the Big Hill where the present United Church Cemetery is located, south to George Crewe's Hill [where Bert and Helen Fisher now live] and down Catalina Road to the Cove. The Wesleyan Chapel referred to in the document is the second Wesleyan Church which was built on the grounds of the "old" Methodist cemetery.

The report continues:

The settlement at Bird Island Cove is about Thirty Years growth, contains upwards of four hundred inhabitants who, notwithstanding its rugged and exposed situation, have done much within the last year or two towards its external improvement. Nevertheless much remains to be done to bring them upon a level with others similarly situated upon the coast...

www.townofelliston.ca

Information Provided by Mr. Doug Cole