# The Battle of Fox Trap



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**Acknowledgements**

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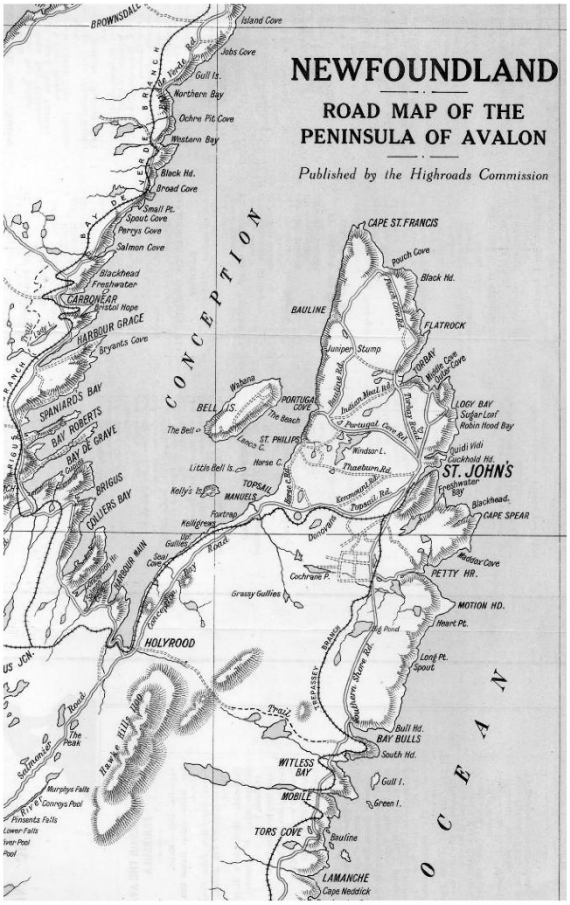
**Prologue**

IT'S COME DOWN TO US as the Battle of Foxtrap. At the time, it was known as the Battle of Fox Trap Bridge. But it was more than a fight in Foxtrap, or a battle over one particular bridge. Though most people are unaware of it now, those five or six days of rioting and rage that erupted in Fox Trap in late July, 1880 nearly shook the foundations of the Colony. For it was a battle about Newfoundland, about its future, about its economy and its way of life. The surveying party that the residents of Manuels, Fox Trap, Kelligrews and Upper Gullies attacked were bringing more than just a railroad through their potato gardens and cabbage patches: Those surveyors were bringing Confederation with Canada. Or so the residents believed. And the thought of that inflamed the whole South Shore, from Topsail to Seal Cove. By the time the battle was over, it was viewed as a miracle that no one had been killed. With angry fishermen and their wives waving pitchforks and chucking rocks on one side and armed police with bayonets affixed to their guns on the other, the outcome could have been much worse.

But we're getting ahead ourselves. To understand what happened in the July heat of 1880, we have to start at the beginning.




**PICTURE: ROAD MAP OF THE PENINSULA OF AVALON**

Chapter 1

## Turning Our backs to the Canadian Wolf

NEWFOUNDLAND IN THE 19TH CENTURY was a volatile place, especially when it came to politics. If people weren't fighting over religion, they were fighting over confederation. And when William Whiteway became Prime Minister in1878 and said he would build a railway across the island, they fought about that.

With no easy links to the rest of the world, Newfoundlanders looked inward. Most of Newfoundland's small population was huddled in coves and inlets along Conception Bay, as far from the side of the island facing Nova Scotia as you could get. That's because France held treaty rights to the western side of the island where Newfoundlanders were not allowed to settle.

Even on the Avalon Peninsula, isolation was a problem. The settlements from Topsail to Indian Pond were popularly known as the South Shore. A rough road, dusty in summer, muddy in spring and fall, connected them to St. John's. Another road connected St. John's to Portugal Cove, which served as a port for packet boats hauling people and packages from the other side of Conception Bay, and there was a road from St. John's to Bay Bulls. But for the most part, travel was by sail or steamboat, especially for the hundreds of little outports and fishing stations dotted along the rest of the island and Labrador. Everyone lived on the coast and nearly everyone fished or depended upon the fishery, for a living.

Most Newfoundlanders were poor. Every year, the Newfoundland government spent what it considered to be huge sums on "poor relief." Many people were put to work repairing or building roughhewn roads around their settlements.

Sometimes they were paid in molasses and Indian meal. The island, and the south coast of Labrador, which grew increasingly important as a summer fishing station, may have been the base for one of the richest fishing grounds in the world, but the fishery was seasonal and even in its best years could not provide everyone with a decent living.

Then there was the politics. Newfoundland was the last British colony in North America to get the right to elect and be governed by its own politicians. And when it did finally get its first representative assembly in 1832, it was torn apart by fighting and intrigue, most of it tied to competition between Roman Catholics and Protestants for power and high paying patronage jobs.

By 1841, the British government felt the only solution to the turmoil was to suspend Newfoundland's constitution and redesign it. In 1855, it was changed again but the rivalry between Roman Catholic and Protestant groups continued.[1]

In 1864, a new issue snuck up on Newfoundland, one that would divide its people as much as religion had: confederation with Canada.

With the growing lines of railroads building connections between the peoples of Upper and Lower Canada and the Maritimes, visionary leaders including John A. Macdonald saw a union of the remaining British North America provinces as the best way forward. It would protect them from any expansion desires felt by its powerful neighbour to the south, and it would bolster trade and economic growth. Great Britain too was eager to see her Canadian provinces become more independent, especially financially.

Newfoundland missed the first conference held to discuss the idea of a Canadian union, at Charlottetown in September, 1864. When it was invited to send representatives to the follow-up conference eat Quebec City the following month, it dispatched two observers. Representing the Opposition Liberal side was its leader, Ambrose Shea. Joining him was the Speaker of the Assembly, a Conservative, F.B.T. Carter.

Though they were instructed to act only as observers, both Shea and Carter liked what they heard about confederation and saw great benefits for Newfoundland. Both men supported a unanimous resolution by John A. MacDonald that “the best interests and present and future prosperity of British North America will be promoted by a Federal union...”

A growing area for farming

| Settlement | Residents 1845 | Residents 1884 | Brls. Potatos 1845 | Brls. Potatos 1884 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Topsail | 118 | 306 | 825 | 1967 |
| Chamberlains | 105 | 225 | 420 | 927 |
| Manuels | 74 | 121 | 510 | 530 |
| Long Pond | 135 | 435 | 759 | 2266 |
| Fox Trap | 88 | 323 | 440 | 1755 |
| Middle Bight | 76 | 142 | 260 | 1282 |
| Kelligrews | 78 | 296 | 532 | 2248 |
| Lower Gully | 54 | 161 | 485 | 1111 |
| Upper Gully | 84 | 141 | 420 | 1028 |

**(PICTURE: As the population of St. John’s and Conception Bay grew, the settlements on the South Shore became increasingly important for farming, especially Topsail, Long Pond and Kelligrews. Between 1845 and 1884, the population of the area more than doubled. The volume of vegetables grown and the number of cattle raised became substantial, ensuring that when the railroad came through in the early 1880s it would run into farms. After the Battle of Fox Trap, the railway surveyors plotted a course that tightly hugged the coast to Seal Cove, largely avoiding farms located inland.)**

Under the terms of the 1864 conference, Newfoundland would have ended up the best off financially of all the Canadian provinces, thanks to annual payments from the federal government to the Government of Newfoundland. The new Dominion of Canada was also prepared to pay for a steamboat service between Newfoundland and the mainland and between Newfoundland and Britain.[2]

While still on the mainland, Carter and Shea made public speeches in support of Confederation. Shea believed it would be a mistake for Newfoundland not to join the union. Carter said most Newfoundlanders would support it.

Those speeches were picked up and reported in the St. John’s newspapers. At first, some of the newspapers, including the Liberal-oriented *The Newfoundlander* and the Conservative-sided *The Public Ledger*, were warm to the idea. But then Charles Fox Bennett, a prominent St. John’s merchant and mining speculator, came out swinging against confederation. Bennett controlled the mineral rights to about one million acres of

land on the island and stood to lose a lot if the Canadian government took over responsibility for managing Crown lands.

Bennett played on people's fears and ignorance. He said Newfoundlanders would be saddled with higher taxes to pay for all the railroads and canals being built on the mainland. He said Newfoundland would have to give up "control of our rich colonial resources," and with 12 representatives in the new capital, would have little influence. "Finally he suggested that confederation would end Newfoundland's close ties with Britain."

But Bennett was only getting warmed up. He claimed all political appointments in Newfoundland would be made by the Canadian government, and that Newfoundlanders would be conscripted to fight in Canadian wars.

The Canadian government, Bennett railed, would have "the power to extract the youth, both married and unmarried, of the able-bodied men of the Colony to shed their blood and to leave their bones to bleach in a foreign land, in defense of the Canadian line of boundary and that of the other provinces."[3]

With the American civil war just over and fears that the United States would look north to complete its manifest destiny of controlling the whole continent, Bennett's argument carried weight.

The opposition mood that Bennett and others whipped up made the Newfoundland legislators skittish about adopting the confederation proposal right away, even though most members seemed to favour the idea. Debates about confederation raged in the assembly and in the press for several years.

By 1869, Newfoundland still hadn't decided whether it would join Canada, though by then the neighbouring provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick had. Newspaper and popular support for confederation seemed to be making a comeback. In January and February of that year, Newfoundland's assembly came up with an even richer package of terms that it presented to Macdonald's new dominion. And even though the new Prime Minister of Canada thought the Dominion was getting the poorer end of the deal, he agreed to Newfoundland's terms anyway.

Those terms would have seen Canada take over Newfoundland's public debt and pay a total of $408,922 annually in subsidies and payments, a huge sum at that time. In addition, the federal government would pick up the cost of running Newfoundland's postal system, courts, surveyor general's department, coastal boat system, lighthouses and provide fisheries protection. "These expenses, which were paid at the time by the Newfoundland government, would amount to more than $206,000 a year."[4]

**(PICTURE: One of the destinations made popular by the train was Topsail where this regatta was held circa 1900. Photo courtesy of Memorial University's Online Geography Collection. Pg 13)**

The Parliament of Canada quickly accepted the deal and passed it in the House of Commons. All that remained was for the Assembly in Newfoundland to do the same. But rather than draft the necessary legislation, Newfoundland's politicians decided to play it safe and let the people decide the issue in the coming fall election. For C.F. Bennett and others who were opposed to confederation, that delay bought time and offered an opportunity.

In July 1869, Bennett, who had been in England for a few months, returned and took up leadership of the campaign to oppose confederation. He brought with him retired businessman Walter Grieve who still owned businesses in Newfoundland, but now lived in England. Early in September, Bennett and Grieve left St. John's aboard the S.S. Mary Austin, a vessel Bennett had brought from England for the campaign. He was taking his fight to the coastal communities around the island.

On September 25, *The Morning Chronicle* published the anti-confederate platform and repeated it daily for the next two months. The slogans were:

*"No Confederation! ... Let us keep our Fisheries to ourselves! Let us keep our revenue to ourselves. Newfoundland for the Newfoundlanders. No Reward for Traitors. No Militia Laws for our Young Men. No Drafting for our Sailors. Let us stick to our Old Mother Country, Great Britain, the True Land of the Brave and Home of the Free!!"*

The anti-confederates accused the confederate leaders of trying to sell Newfoundland to Canada. "Charges and counter-charges appeared in the press as the campaign gathered momentum." Ambrose Shea was accused of receiving 210 puncheons of rum from the Canadian government to be used in the campaign, a charge that was proved false.[5]

The campaign got so heated, the Governor stationed a naval vessel at Harbour Grace, and later sent troops to four communities on the north side of Conception Bay, where people who supported confederation were afraid to vote. Bennett rehashed many

of the arguments he had used five years earlier, but turned up the emotional heat on them substantially. Confederation was a “wicked measure”, he said, designed to rob Newfoundlanders of the right of governing themselves. It would mean higher taxes and put every man from 18 to 60 at risk of being drafted and sent away to fight in some war.

Bennett and his side campaigned harder and farther than the pro-confederate party, which in many places didn’t even manage to send its leaders in to make their case. Neither could the confederation side even muster enough candidates, running just 20 people for the 30 seats available in the assembly, while 29 candidates stood for Bennett’s party. Among the seats uncontested was Harbour Main, which included the communities from Topsail to Indian Pond.

In the end, the anti-confederates won 21 seats, eight of them by acclamation. Bennett’s victory made confederation look like it was a dead idea. For the next five or six years, the furore over confederation died down. But then along came the railroad issue and the bogeyman of confederation rose again.

## Chapter 2

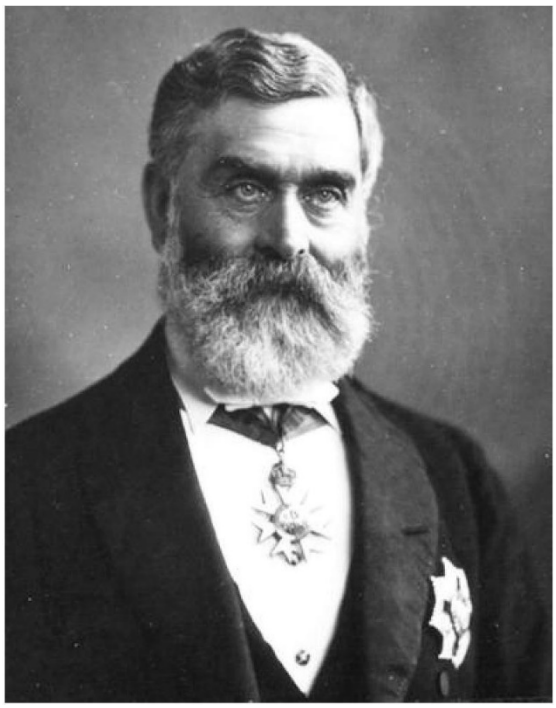
### All aboard to prosperity

IF THE REJECTION of confederation meant anything, it was that Newfoundland’s isolation would continue. The colony was on its own. Relieved to be rid of the responsibility and cost of overseeing most of its Canadian possessions, Great Britain was cutting back, in Newfoundland as well as in the Dominion of Canada. It said from now on, even the expense of the military garrison at St. John’s would have to be borne by the people of Newfoundland.

Into this breach stepped William Whiteway. Born and raised in Devon, England, Whiteway had come to Newfoundland as a young man, became a successful lawyer and even represented C.F. Bennett’s mining interests at Tilt Cove. But Whiteway hadn’t seen eye to eye with Bennett when it came to confederation. During the 1869 election, Whiteway ran as a confederation candidate in the district of Twillingate and Fogo. He was defeated by a couple of Bennett’s business partners.

By 1877, however, Whiteway was sitting in the assembly and when F.B.T. Carter retired as prime minister, he took over the leadership of the government side.

To Whiteway, the way forward for Newfoundland was with a railroad. Railroads had opened up the American west and the Canadian prairies. Perhaps it could do the same for the interior of Newfoundland. For the growing population of Newfoundlanders along the coast, who were dependent on a fishery that unable to provide them with a reliable and adequate living, a railroad might be a route to a better future.



**(Picture: Sir William Whiteway was Newfoundland's longest serving premier and the father of the railway. As a young St. John's lawyer, Whiteway had handled some of the mining interests of speculator and businessman C.F. Bennett. The pair differed over the prospect of union with Canada. When Whiteway ran in favour of Confederation, Bennett worked to defeat him. When Whiteway became premier in April 1878, he was determined to boost Newfoundland's economy by building a railroad. Perhaps because of his past support for confederation, Whiteway was accused by some people of using the railroad to advance the cause of confederation. Photo courtesy of Memorial University's Online Geography Collection.)**

So while Newfoundland might be 50 years behind the rest of North America in getting a railroad, it was none the less enticing. For several years, the government's surveyor general had been crowing about the vast mineral riches that lay waiting to be discovered in the interior. Even Sandford Fleming, the great Scottish-born, Canadian railway engineer, the man responsible for seeing the tracks laid that physically connected the new Dominion, thought a railroad was needed in Newfoundland. Fleming suggested a track across the island, linked to ports on either side, could speed up the movement of people and goods from Europe to North America. He even commissioned and paid for his own agent to explore the island's interior.

When the Newfoundland government raised money in 1875 to conduct a survey, Fleming helped plan its route and sent his own team of surveyors to carry it out. But Prime Minister Carter, who had seen his dreams of confederation spoiled in the 1860s and was uneasy perhaps about starting another big fight, was unprepared to take the next step. Whiteway had no such reservations. He was ready to act.

"First and foremost, the railway was to be a development road, a wand of progress, that would open the country, stimulate mining, agriculture and lumbering, and so free Newfoundland from its retarding dependence on one unpredictable staple."[6]

THE EVENING TELEGRAM.

ANOTHER ENCOUNTER AT FOX TRAP.

Some of the Railway Surveyors Roughly Handled.

An encounter took place yesterday between a number of the residents of Fox Trap and a party of Railway Engineers. It seems that as the latter were about to survey a portion of the line which runs through private property, they were confronted by an opposition which threatened their complete demolition if they dared to proceed. Believing that a gentle firmness would enable them to complete their work, the Railwaymen, after a short consultation, pushed forward with the survey. This had the effect of bringing the combatants into closer proximity. One of the residents carried a flag which bore the inscription, "Fox Trap to the front like solid men." The surveyors were attacked on the right flank with "blubber and pickled water," and they, in turn, returned the assault with denunciation and snow-balls. The fight lasted with much vigor for half an hour or more, when the Railwayites, without much loss, retreated towards the town. Here they met a reinforcement of policemen at Mrs. Squires', under the able

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(**Picture: The May 12, 1882 edition of *The Evening Telegram* alerted people to a second Battle of Fox Trap. This one was shorter than the July 1880 fracas, but railroad surveyors were pelted with blubber and doused with brine.)**

But not everyone agreed with Whiteway. The capital city's fish merchants were especially skeptical. Building a railroad might mean jobs for many of the people dependent upon them all right, but that would make the hiring of labour more competitive and drive up wages. And at an estimated construction cost of $8.5 million, a railroad would saddle the treasury with a heavy debt, which could result in higher taxes and tariffs. And if the railroad did open up the country and make Newfoundland less dependent on the fishery, it could spell a loss of power and influence for the fish merchants.

"The railway seemed to threaten their monopolistic position, and they feared increased labour costs, increased taxes, loss of the coastal trade and eventual colonial bankruptcy and confederation."[7]

But Whiteway pressed on. First he went to London to seek Britain's financial backing and political blessing. He got neither. So he scaled back his ambitions and opted to build a narrow-gauge line instead of a standard gauge – a colossal blunder as it turned out – at half of the previous estimated cost.

Whiteway's railway troubles, in Fox Trap and elsewhere, were about to begin.

## Chapter 3

### "Those Canadian Cormorants"*

ON JULY 7, 1880, a party of 19 engineers and helpers from Canada who were commissioned to survey a route for the new railroad arrived in St. John's aboard the S.S. Nova Scotian. Much press attention, a lot of it negative, greeted them, especially when the men rejected the boarding houses reserved for their stay and opted instead – at the Newfoundland government's expense – for the best hotels in the city.[8]

But their comfort wouldn't last long.

For many people, the fact the surveyors were Canadians was suspicious in itself. Memories of the confederation battle, coupled with people's knowledge that Whiteway had been a prominent supporter of union with Canada, set the rumour mill spinning. Canada was secretly funding the survey, said some, and would use the railway to take over Newfoundland. People would be taxed to their chins to pay for the railroad, and if a surveyor's chain passed over a man's property, it would automatically become the property of the railroad.

Other tall tales circulated too, some of them spun by prominent merchants from the city who were happy to fill the ears of fishermen and farmers of the South Shore with lies and exaggerations. One claim held that after the railroad was built, a toll gate would be erected outside St. John's, forcing people to either ride the train, or pay a big fee to enter the city. Some people say old C.F. Bennett himself was responsible for that one.

*The so-called 'Raven of the Sea', the Cormorant is a dark-plummaged seabird of the St. Lawrence River known for its voracious appetite and is sometimes portrayed as a symbol of gluttony.

A growing area for farming

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(**Table: A growing area for farming. Pg 20)**

Whoever said it, many people believed it and by the time the Canadian surveyors reached Topsail, the residents of the South Shore were astir. Filled with stories that the trains would burn up all the ground on either side of the rails for half a mile or more and ruin their vegetable patches, the residents of the Conception Bay settlements were determined to stop it.

"The opinion prevails all over the district, indeed we may say, all over the country that this Railway business is a huge fraud, with self-interest running all through it and CONFEDERATION at the bottom," claimed *The Evening Telegram*. "All along the South Shore people are suspicious and justly so."

A watch was kept for the surveyors. When the men got up before dawn and headed out on the bay to fish, the women headed for their vegetable gardens to stand guard. Finally, the red flag on the top of a surveyor's pole was spotted. Like a match tossed on dry grass, word that the Canadians had arrived raced like fire along the shore. It didn't take long for a crowd to gather. As the surveyors and their helpers sweated and grunted their way through the bush in the late July heat they were confronted by a growing throng of fishermen's wives. When the men returned from fishing, they joined the women in their vigil. Probably by the time the surveyors reached Long Pond, where some farms can still be found a butting the old rail line to this day, progress on the survey became nearly impossible. Angry words and threats were exchanged as the crowd grew larger and more confrontational. The surveyors sent back to St. John's for help.

## Chapter 4

### Judge Prowse presiding

IN 1880, THE POLICE court in St. John's was presided over by two judges. Nearly every day a small parade of drunken seamen and stevedores, wife beaters and petty thieves passed through the docket providing entertainment for newspaper reporters and other lookers-on who hung out to pass the time and gossip. Some of the culprits were fined, others admonished to swear an oath of temperance, the worst of them carted off to the jail astride Quidi Vidi Lake for a period of hard labour.

When news reached St. John's that a crowd had assembled on the South Shore and was barring the surveyors from proceeding, the government asked Judge D.W. Prowse, a colourful, some said eccentric, but avowed supporter of the railroad, to hurry to the scene. Prowse set out with Inspector Paul Carty and a contingent of 11 police officers, nine on foot and two on horseback, to quell the disturbance.

Their departure from the city didn't escape notice.

"We are informed that the effort of the government to force the Confederation Railway down the throats of the South Shore people at the bayonet's point is as illegal as it is unmanly," *The Evening Telegram* reported on July 26. "The Railway Act gives no power for Government Railway Surveyors to force their way into private premises for the purpose of surveying. The Canadian Surveyors who have illegally trespassed upon private property are therefore the transgressors, and guilty of provoking a *breach of the peace* in the late *fracas*."

Prowse couldn't help but recognize that in barring the surveyors from entering their property, the people of the South Shore were not doing anything illegal. So he tried to reason with them.

"For days and days I sat on the hillside and told them all about the advantages of the new line," said Prowse. "It was all in vain; I could not overcome their dread of the new and dangerous enterprise."

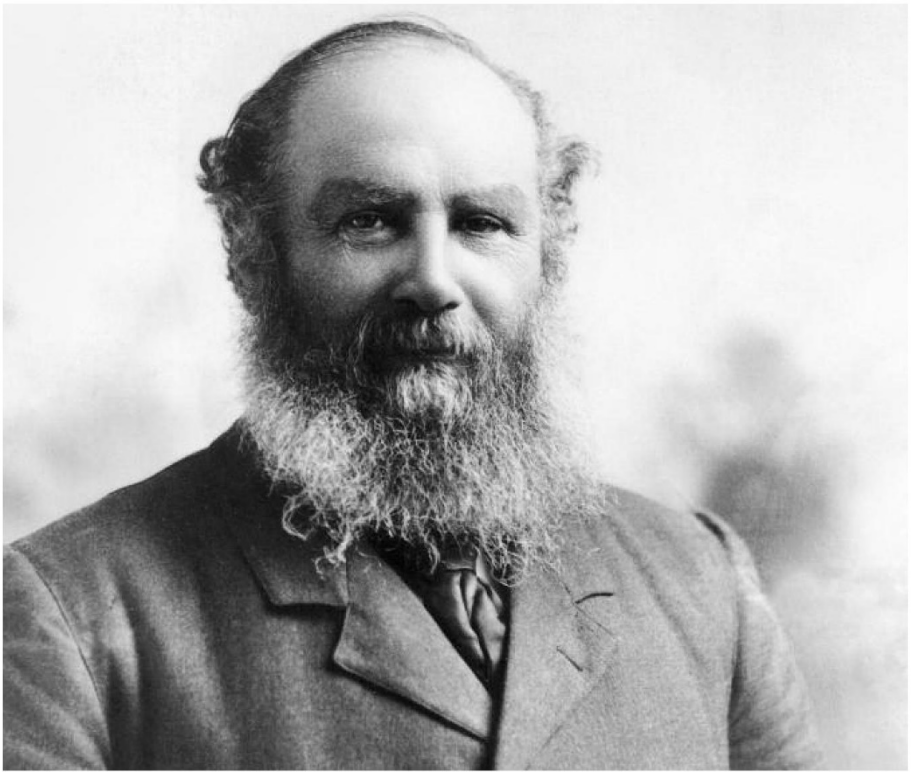
As the days wore on, the crowd grew more agitated. Some men carried pitchforks and knives. An occasional one came armed with an old blunderbuss used for sealing. The women filled their aprons with stones and waved broom stick sat the "Canadian Cormorants" who were out to steal their land.

“They have been informed,” one observer told *The Morning Chronicle*, “by persons from St. John’s that ... their lands (will be) taken from them without payment, and that these Canadians have come to unite the island to Canada by a railway. One ancient virago, with arms bared, hair streaming wildly behind, leads the troops, brandishing the fork with which cod are thrown on the stages and declares she will let daylight into the stomachs of these invaders.”

Some people blamed the press, especially *The Evening Telegram*, which had been raising many questions about the railroad, for inciting the residents.

“When we find the act of threatening the leader of a surveying party with a loaded gun, referred to in a public print in a laudatory jocular way, and similar deeds beyond Topsail applauded, we need not be surprised to hear of the scene sat Kelligrews, Fox Trap and Upper Gullies, which ... must be deplored as a disgrace to the country,” said another writer to *The Morning Chronicle*. “If all we hear be true, it is not our fishermen who are at the bottom of it, and I hope our authorities will bring to justice the really guilty parties.”

Prowse, the police and the surveyors were in a tight spot. Determined to calm things, the judge traveled along the Shore trying to assure people they had nothing to fear from the railroad. Prowse promised that if the surveyors did happen to damage any crops or property, the owner would be promptly reimbursed. To bolster his case, Prowse read them a letter from their Member in the Assembly, Joseph Little, bearing the same message. Prowse also enlisted the aid of a local clergyman, the Rev. Edward Colley, pastor of All Saints Parish. A local school headmaster also tried to reason with the crowd. For the moment, this seemed to allay some of the tension.



**(PICTURE: A year after Newfoundland rejected Confederation with Canadian 1869, the British Imperial Government withdrew its garrison from St. John's. Daniel Woodley Prowse, better known as Judge Prowse, a highly intelligent but somewhat eccentric prominent citizen of the colony, was called upon to organize a special force of policemen to replace the garrison troops and bolster the existing constabulary. Ten years later, when residents of the South Shore of Conception Bay tried to stop a party of Canadian surveyors from laying out a route for a railroad through their farms and properties, Prowse was dispatched to lead a force of 12 police officers to regain order.** ***Photo Courtesy of Boulder Publications.) PG 25***

From Fox Trap, Prowse travelled to Holyrood, Harbour Main and Conception Harbour to deliver the same message. There he found people in favour of the railroad thanks to the efforts of one of their priests who had for some time been arguing its merits.

But when Judge Prowse returned to Upper Gullies, he found the whole place in commotion, *The Morning Chronicle* reported on July 29. "Crowds of excited men and women were assembled, threatening violence if the surveyors dared to proceed and refusing to listen to any explanations. They used the names of two gentlemen of high social standing in St. John's (names at present withheld) who they said had told them to drive off the surveyors, for the Queen was going to give up the country to Canada—that their beds would be taken from them for taxes, and that a tallgate (probably a toll gate) was to be erected at St. John's and no one allowed to go in or out only by railway."


**(PICTURE: The railway provided steady, well-paying jobs for some residents of the South Shore. The crew pictured here in 1942 worked between Kelligrews and Irvine station in what is now Paradise. This photograph was taken outside the train station opposite Cherry Lane, Manuels. It includes foreman Matthew Nugent (front right), section man William J. Walsh (front left), Bernard Nugent (rear right) and James Nugent.** ***Photo courtesy of Ron Walsh and the Newfoundland and Labrador Railway and Coastal Museum.)***

The people believed the red cloth attached to the end of the surveyor's stick was the flag of Canada and if it was planted on the ground and the measuring tape rolled out, their land would be gone.

On Monday, Prowse spent another three hours trying to reason with the protesters. He had just sat down to dinner when the leveller of the surveying crew, a Mr. McCarthy, burst in and said "that he and his party had been attacked by a large mob of men and women armed with pitchforks, sticks and stones, that they seized the surveying instruments and carried them off and threatened the most brutal violence." One report said the people grew tired of watching the surveyors holed up in their tents. McCarthy was able to identify one man whom he accused of leading the women and telling them to throw rocks at the surveyors. "Matters had now come to a crisis." Three days of effort to make the people see reason had failed. Things had only gotten worse.

**(PICTURE: The advent of the railroad not only meant it was easier and faster for people on the South Shore to travel to St. John's, it also made it easier for townies to travel to Topsail beach, Kelligrews and other places on the South Shore that quickly became popular for trouting and picnicking. Sunday excursions became so popular that some Church leaders in St. John's became upset.** ***Photo courtesy of Newfoundland and Labrador Railway and Coastal Museum.*****)**

Prowse quickly took statements from McCarthy and some of the other men who had been put to flight by the mob. Gathering up the 11 police officers, he hurried back to Fox Trap Bridge, where "a crowd of over 600 had gathered from all quarters—some of them had guns—all of them had formidable weapons—the women carried aprons full of stones with which the police were repeatedly struck, they had worked themselves up into a fury."[9]

Ordering the policemen to attach their bayonets, Prowse marched the men into the crowd sending many of the people scattering. Once the commotion was over, the man fingered as a ringleader, a fisherman named Charley Andrews, most likely from Upper Gullies, was hauled away to a cell in St. John's. Prowse then retired to Topsail and sent the police officers door to door along the South Shore to look for the stolen equipment.

At some doors, the constables were met by women who had faced them at the bridge and who greeted them now with "the foulest abuse." But before dawn the next day, all the surveyors' instruments were recovered – and three of the women, including

Mary Jane Butler, of either Fox Trap or Middle Bight, which is now part of Kelligrews, were in custody. (Later that year, Butler would be hauled before the police court in St. John's again, this time for facing off against a constable who was on the South Shore destroying dogs. She was fined $8 and given an alternative of spending 30 days in jail).

The fracas gave the newspaper editors a field day. The people of the South Shore might be battling at the bridge, but it was just as vicious between the advocates and opponents of the railroad in the press. There were accusations of corruption and conspiracy. The controversy over the railroad seemed like it would never abate. The following year, the New York businessman who won the contract to build the line, A.L. Blackman, was called to court for beating the editor of *The Evening Telegram* with his cane.

Details about the battle scenes along the shore continued to trickle into the newspapers and get spun up in the taverns and on the wharves.

"Immediately after 'the Battle of Fox Trap' the victorious Constabulary force returned to Topsail with the prisoners captured at the Bridge," *The Evening Telegram* told its readers in a cheeky report compiled two weeks after the main event. "The latter consisted of three middle-aged women, evidently leaders of the insurgents. Every precaution was taken to prevent their escape. They were allowed to have no communication with each other from the time of their capture until they were ushered into the presence of the commander-in-chief at Topsail. Three wagons were used to convey them to the latter place in each of which one of the prisoners was placed and closely guarded by three 'invincibles 'with rifles and sidearms. The vehicles were driven at a rapid pace, a considerable distance being allowed between each. Altogether it may be said that the campaign was judiciously planned and successfully carried out, and no one will begrudge General Prowse, Inspector Carty and the gallant little army under their command the unfading laurels won by them at 'the battle of Fox Trap Bridge'."

## Chapter 5

### The battle resumes

WITH THE SCRAP AT THE BRIDGE over and the "Fox Trap Amazons" hustled away, the surveying party continued its work the next day, but gingerly and with policemen guarding them. They took great care not to trample crops or destroy trees as they hauled their equipment through the woods and across potato gardens.

"The only injury done was the lopping off the branch of a plum tree, which could not be avoided, and for this the sum of four dollars was claimed and promptly paid," said one report. Another report indicated that a man who claimed three of his small fir trees were damaged was given a dollar.

Residents along the South Shore continued to regard the surveyors warily. But there would be no threat of violence again until the team reached Tilton, between Spaniard's Bay and Harbour Grace, when a group of fishermen's wives and mothers brought their work to a halt, claiming the same fears and reasons as the folks at Fox Trap. However, a local judge happened by and talked the women out of their siege.

The following spring, tensions arose among some government and railway officials again as railway construction began. Nobody knew how the people of the South Shore would react when the crews showed up to clear brush and level the land in

preparation for the laying of tracks. But it would be several months before the workmen reached the vicinity of the fracas.

"In the fall of 1881 railway construction was proceeding at a frantic pace in order to have the line as far along as possible by the time the construction season ended. There were about 900 men working between St. John's and Manuels during that fall at a rate of pay of eight cents an hour. By October there were eight or 10 miles of roadbed ready for ties and rails, while the right-of-way was cleared for several more miles... Most of the work was by pick and shovel, and sometimes the labourers were asked to bring their own tools. Many a prospective labourer didn't own a shovel, but almost every family had a spade for the garden, so gang foremen became accustomed to the sight of men seeking work armed with garden spades."[10]

By fall, with the railway workers in Manuels, it looked like more trouble was brewing. The "Heroines of the bridge" reported a newspaper, had issued a manifesto calling on people along the Shore to prepare for a "determined stand against the invading forces of the railway Company."

Some of the residents travelled to St. John's carrying a petition "asking the Executive to have mercy on the inhabitants of Manuels and Fox Trap and save their cabbage patches from the insatiable greed of the land grabbers...Then came the ultimatum. 'Let the line pass a mile and a half inside of our settlements and we will offer no resistance. Otherwise we must fight it out on the line, even it takes all winter'."[11]

But with construction ceased by the winter snows, confrontation was avoided. Then came spring.

On May 12, with patches of snow still throwing off steam in the woods around Conception Bay, trouble resumed. A party of surveyors who were about to survey a section of line through private property were confronted again. This time the surveyors were determined to press ahead. The residents warned they would be "demolished" if they proceeded. The surveyors kept coming.

"One of the residents carried a flag which bore the inscription, 'Fox Trap to the Front like Solid Men'. The surveyors were attacked on the right flank with 'blubber and pickled water', and they, in turn, returned the assault with denunciation and snowballs," *The Evening Telegram* reported. "The fight lasted with much vigor for half an hour or more, when the Railwayites, without much loss, retreated towards the town. Here they met a reinforcement of policemen at Mrs. Squires' (hotel in Manuels) under the able command of Head Constable Sullivan, and immediately set out, with confidence in their chief, to retrieve their fallen honors. On arriving at the scene of the encounter, they found the enemy had taken to the woods... We may mention that one little boy of fourteen, who carried the ammunition for the Fox Trap Amazons was captured and brought on to St. John's where he appeared before His Honour-Judge Conroy this morning. The little prisoner admitted the offence with which he was charged, viz.: that of impeding the progress of a measure which is said to be the instrument of our civilization, and a cultivator of our dormant resources. His worship let him off on the promise to become a good boy and a railway man in future, and with the injunction that if he ever came before him again he would have reason to remember the Judge the longest day he lived."

Meanwhile, the boy of 14 wasn't the only fellow who had learned his lesson that the government was determined to run the railway through. Charley Andrews, the

leader of the first battle, was also seeing things in a different light, at least according to Judge Prowse, who ran into the rebel shortly after the first fracas, while doing his rounds at the city jail.


**(PICTURE: The first length of track, laid from St. John's to Harbour Grace between 1881 and 1884, was hurriedly assembled and many corners were cut due to the precarious financial state of the syndicate behind the project. Consequently, much of the line had to be rebuilt, including this trestle at Lower Gully in what is now Kelligrews. *Photo courtesy of Memorial University's Online Geography Collection.*) PG 31**

NEWFOUNDLAND RAILWAY.

Sir FRANK H. EVANS, K.C.M.G., Receiver and Manager.

Commencing Sept. 30th, 1895, at 9.30 a.m. **Time Table** Daily,—Sunday Excepted.

| Train No. 1. DEPARTURE. | STATIONS. | Train No. 2. ARRIVAL. |
|---|---|---|
| | TO HARBOR GRACE. | |
| 9.30 A.M. | *St. John's | 2.15 P.M. |
| | Donnemere | |
| | Irving | |
| 10.20 | *Topsail | 1.30 |
| | Manuels | |
| | Kelligrews | |
| | Upper Gully | |
| | Seal Cove | |
| | Dept's | |
| | Brien's | |
| 11.30 | *Holyrood | 12.25 |
| | Woodford | |
| ARR. 12.00 | | |
| DEP. 12.10 | *Salmon Cove | 12.01 |
| | Brigus Junction | |
| | Hodge Water | |
| 1.30 | *Whitbourne | 11.05 |
| | Blaketown | |
| 2.05 | *Broad Cove | 10.20 |
| | Spaniard's Bay R.D. | |
| 2.45 | *Tilton | 9.48 |
| ARR. 3.00 P.M. | *Harbor Grace | DEP. 9.30 A.M. |
| | TO SAINT JOHN'S. | |

*REGULAR STATIONS.—All others are "Way or Flag Stations only."
Where no time is stated the Trains stop only on signal, or to leave freight and passengers.
Trains Nos. 1 and 2 meet and pass at Salmon Cove.
☞ Destroy all former Time Tables.

THOMAS NOBLE,
Manager for Receiver.

September 23rd, 1895.

**(PICTURE: NEWFOUNDLAND RAILWAY TIME TABLE PG 32)**

"'Well Charley,' I said, 'how are you getting on?'" Judge Prowse recalled.

"I am all for the railway now, Judge," said Andrews.

"How has that change come over?" said Prowse.

"'Well," said Andrews, "it was this way. An English sailor chap got drunk and he were put into my cell; when he wakes in the mornin' he says to me, 'Well, old chap, what in the name of heaven brings you here? 'I told 'un it were fer fightin' agen a railway'. 'What an infernal old bloke you must be, 'he said, 'to do the like of that. Why, the railway is the poor man's road, 'and then that sailor chap he up and explained to me all about 'en, so I'se all for the railway."

"But Charley," said Prowse, "did I not explain all this to you over and over again? Did I not tell you all the work it would give the people, how it would bring all the goods to your doors, and quick passages in and out to town?"

Andrews hung his head for a second, then looked up. "Yes, Judge," he said, "but we knowed you was paid for sayin'dem tings."

## Chapter 6

**Railway fever**

THE FEAR AND SUSPICION about the railroad lingered but not for long. In some places, the residents continued to refuse the surveyors and workers access to their land to build the line. In several areas, including at Fox Trap, Kelligrews, Lance Cove and Indian Pond, the railway company had little choice but lay the tracks practically on the seashore. And in the newspapers and Assembly, the war of words about the railway and what it would mean for the country's finances and future continued.

For some people along the South Shore, the construction no doubt meant a job or a chance to supplement fishing or farming income cutting timber, hauling equipment, or unloading some of the 10,000 ties ordered for delivery at Kelligrews station, which was used as a depot.

"By this time the fisherman began to look upon the railway in a different light," said one travel writer, who visited Newfoundland. "He was being paid handsomely to fell tress, to load earth and to load and unload sleepers."[12]

Meanwhile, the syndicate responsible for building the line was in financial trouble. Corners were being cut, literally, with the engineers laying track using sharper turns than they were supposed to and on grades that hadn't been leveled as much as originally planned. In many places, tracks were laid without enough rock ballast below them, necessitating costly and frequent repairs in coming years. The syndicate kept pressing the government for money. At one meeting, the head of the railway syndicate, Blackman, and the Speaker of the Assembly, A.J.W. McNeilly, nearly came to blows. McNeilly soon quit the government side and crossed the floor to join the opposition party.

On June 29, with his political future on the line, Prime Minister Whiteway opened the first passenger service to Topsail with three bands and 300 passengers in tow. A month later, the service was extended to Upper Gullies.

On July 13, Whiteway was the guest of honour on a train outing from St. John's to Manuels. The party lunched under a large tent on the grounds of Mrs. Mary Tobin Squires' Bellevue Hotel. At 5:30 they climbed back aboard the train for a ride to Upper Gullies and then back to St. John's. The event didn't escape the St. John's newspapers.

The first fatality on the railroad – which occurred just five days later in Upper Gullies when a woman slipped to her death after disobeying orders not to hop between cars to reach a flat car carrying some workers home – got smaller mention.

By fall, with the line extended all the way to Holyrood, people along the South Shore were starting to feel some affection for the railroad. They would grow to love it a lot more in future years. The railroad allowed the residents of the South Shore faster, and easier, access to St. John's. And in much later years, when the interior did open up as promised, it was a route to jobs in lumbering camps and mines in Central and Western Newfoundland and eventually to Port aux Basques and the ferry to the mainland.

Local businesses along the Shore benefitted too, especially those catering to tourists from St. John's. Picnic and trouting excursions to Topsail Beach and Squires' Hotel in Manuels became so popular, especially on Sundays, that Church leaders were soon preaching against them as a sin against the Sabbath.

**The long view**

NEWFOUNDLANDERS QUICKLY got over their reservations about the rail-road. When William Whiteway led his party into an election in 1882, the railroad was the main issue and the government side was reelected strongly. In time, the rumble of the train and the call of its whistle stirred the romantic spirit of people all along the South Shore and everywhere in Newfoundland where the train tracks reached. But the financial cost was enormous. The next milestone was the completion of the line to Harbour Grace in 1884, but by then, Blackman's syndicate was bankrupt. For the next 12 years, a receiver ran the line, which to some people's surprise eventually became modestly profitable thanks to the fact it was strung along the most populated settlements on the island.
The job of extending the line across the island was eventually taken up by a Scottish-born, Canadian railway engineer named R.G. Reid. He ran the Newfoundland Railway, some say at a profit, others say at a loss, until 1923 when he was glad to sell it back to the Newfoundland government for $2 million. By1929, the year when the Great Depression hit, Whiteway's railway dream had cost the Newfoundland treasury some $40 million. Coupled with the debt acquired from fitting out a regiment for action in the Great War, it undoubtedly contributed to Newfoundland's financial collapse in the early 1930s. That collapse led to a decision by Newfoundland's politicians to give up responsible government and to invite the British to appoint a commission to run our affairs. The commission years were followed by another vote on confederation, just as contentious as the one in 1869, but this time with a different, albeit much narrower, outcome.

Looking back, the people of Topsail, Manuels, Foxtrap, Kelligrews, Upper Gullies, Indian Pond and everywhere along the South Shore were probably right when they argued that the railroad would lead the country into debt and as a consequence into the arms of Canada. They just didn't think it would take so long.

But eventually they grew to love their trains. When the last whistle blew, in 1988, it left a pang in many hearts.

Today, you can walk the old rail bed between Topsail Pond and Indian Pond without fear of a locomotive or trolley forcing you to scurry away. But if you tread softly and listen hard you can still feel the rumble in the earth and hear the blast of that whistle, summoning you to a time long ago in a place not so far away. For those of us old enough to have heard it, that whistle calls us still.

## End Notes

1. The government structure formed in 1832 saw an Assembly of 15 elected members. However, the real power lay with the Legislative Council, or executive branch of the government, the members of which were appointed by the Governor. Often, the Assembly members, who were mostly Roman Catholics, were at odds with the Council members, who were mostly Protestants. In 1842, in a bid to end the constant rivalry between the two branches, the Imperial Government instituted an Amalgamated Assembly. That saw elected and appointed members sitting together. But this system also suffered from constant fighting. In 1848, the structure reverted back to the earlier system. After much lobbing from reformers in Newfoundland, the Imperial Government

decided in 1854 that it would grant Newfoundland Responsible Government the following year. Under that system, the executive branch of government was drawn from the party with the most members in the Assembly. The leader of that party was named premier.

2. One of the best sources on the fight over Confederation prior to 1869 is Edward Moulton's 1960 master's thesis, *The Political History of Newfoundland,1861-1869.* Moulton went on to publish several books during a distinguished career in the Department of History at the University of Manitoba and later. Moulton's account of F.B.T. Carter's and Ambrose Shea's attendance at the Confederation conference is found on pages 162-168.

3. Ibid. pp. 168-174

4. Ibid. pp. 271.

5. Ibid. pp. 286-289

6. James Hiller, *The Railway and Politics in Newfoundland, 1870-1901*. Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1974, pp. 1. Hiller is the leading historian on the railway in Newfoundland and the politics surrounding it. His books and articles are clearly written and are an objective assessment of what transpired. The best way to access them is to visit the Centre for Newfoundland Studies at Memorial University.

7. Ibid, pp. 9

8. See A. R. Penney, *A History of the Newfoundland Railway, Volume 1 (1881-1923).* Harry Cuff Publications Ltd., 1988, pp.5-6. The late Alf Penney was a career railway man who brought passion and scholarship to his account of the railroad. His book is a well-written and very enjoyable account of the trains in Newfoundland.

9.The exact location of the battle has been lost to history. Local legend maintains it occurred on the main road running through Fox Trap near where the NAPA Auto Parts store is presently located.

10. Penney, pp. 9-10.

11. Eric Moon, The Fighting Women of Foxtrap, in *The Atlantic Advocate*, Vol 49 No. 7, 1959, pp. 39-43.

12. Beckles Wilson, *The Tenth Island: Being Some Account of Newfoundland, Its People, Its Politics, Its Problems and Its Peculiarities*, London, Grant Richards,1897, pp. 171.

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