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ST. JOHN'S BEFORE 1888: A TOWN UNPLANNED

This is a story about housing in St. John's. It is the story of a time when some families lived in crowded conditions because there were too few houses. It is the story of a time when some families lived in houses condemned as unfit for habitation. Yet these families had no other place to live. How did such a situation come to be? How long did it last? What attempts were made to solve it?



Figure 1.1. A view across the harbour of St. John's from the South Side, c. 1890 (City of St. John's Archives [CSJA] 01-20-001).

On 9 May 1888 St. John's was incorporated and acquired its first municipal council. Twenty-nine years later, Sir Edward Morris (Newfoundland's prime minister, 1909–17) reflected back on that time:

We had no civic government. The control and the management of the civic affairs of St. John's were managed by the Water Company and the Board of Works. . . . we had but a

very limited sewerage system, the most important of all civic services; we had no sidewalks on our principal streets; we had but a limited supply of water; we had a Fire Department that went to pieces the first time it had to grapple with a serious conflagration; we had no parks or gardens, which in other cities are the lungs of the people; we had no light, save a few old-fashioned gas lamps that tended to illuminate only the darkness; no permanent Health Officer; no telephone service and no pavement in our principal street. (Morris 1907)

In his brief description Sir Edward touched on many of the features of the town that made it a less than an ideal place to live: limited sewer service, limited water service, the lack of parks or gardens, the danger of fire in a wooden town, and the lack of a municipal council. The combination of these factors had given rise to a serious lack of quality of life in St. John's, which was particularly expressed in its lack of decent housing.

Transition from Fishery to Industry: New Jobs, More Workers, Increased Burdens on the Town

St. John's was settled in the seventeenth century and engaged in the migratory fishery through much of the eighteenth century. It then transitioned, with flushes of immigration, into a mercantile town with a settled population, the centre of the colony's government, and increased engagement in international trade. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the town had begun to transition yet again with the advent of its industrial growth. "It is clear that the 1880s is an important benchmark in Newfoundland's economic history. The traditional economy reached a limit to its extensive growth and further development was perceived as a function of the emergence of modern resource industries" (Alexander 1976, 65). Industrialization went beyond the resource industries to the development of secondary manufacturing and brought new patterns of wage employment.



Figure 1.2. On the wharf: the cod fishery, early twentieth century (CSJA 01-13-011).

The 1880s were an exciting time for residents of St. John's. Jostling against the blacksmiths, sailmakers, cooperages, shoemakers, bakers, located in their traditional workshops in sheds and houses scattered throughout the town, were now large factories employing dozens of labourers. There were shoe factories, clothing factories, furniture factories, biscuit factories, and iron foundries. Gaden's Ginger Ale factory helped to quench the thirst of local residents, and Archibald's Tobacco employed 120 people to produce Newfoundland plug tobacco (Alexander 1976). That product would later give rise to an anti-spit bylaw. The largest factory of all was Colonial Cordage on Ropewalk Lane, which employed almost 200 "hands" (*ENL* Rope making). A new dry dock was completed (*ENL* St. John's). Electricity (Baker, Pitt, and Pitt 1990) and the railway arrived (*ENL* Railways; Hiller 1980).

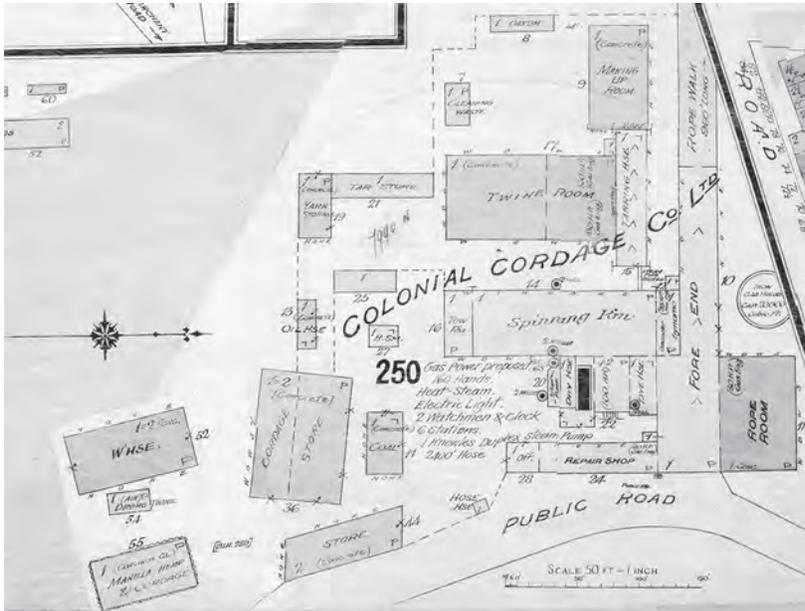


Figure 1.3. The Colonial Cordage Company (City of St. John’s Insurance Plan 1893).

In 1858 the labour force in secondary activities was 5 per cent of the total; by 1891 it had risen to 22 per cent (Alexander 1976, 68). These new industrial activities and the need to accommodate the workers placed an increasing strain on the town’s already inadequate local services, water, and sewerage. This resulted in conditions that were described by the Medical Society as “filthy and disgusting . . . [and] would lower the vital powers of the community, so as to make it succumb more readily to any epidemic that may arise” (JHA 1879).

A Haphazard Collection of Buildings

The layout of the streets and lanes of St. John’s had never been planned. In some other British colonies, for example in Upper Canada, the British government had been determined to establish settlement and did so by

surveying large tracts of land into plots, together with a road system, and assigning a particular portion of land in a specific location to every settler. But Newfoundland belonged to the fishery. It was acknowledged that “the right of the soil rests in the King . . . but in this island it has been conveyed away to the exclusive rights of the fishery” (Newfoundland Law Reports 1819). The land was in the governor’s gift to give and was granted at will to important men in town in the military and in the fishery. Houses were sited and streets were developed in an ad hoc fashion, “all out of straight,” on these estates (O’Neill 2003). Admittedly, to make a plan would have been difficult, considering the very steep hill that flanked the town and the presence of rock outcrops such as the one on McBride’s Hill, which confined Water Street to a width of six feet in 1809 (Fey 1956, 156).

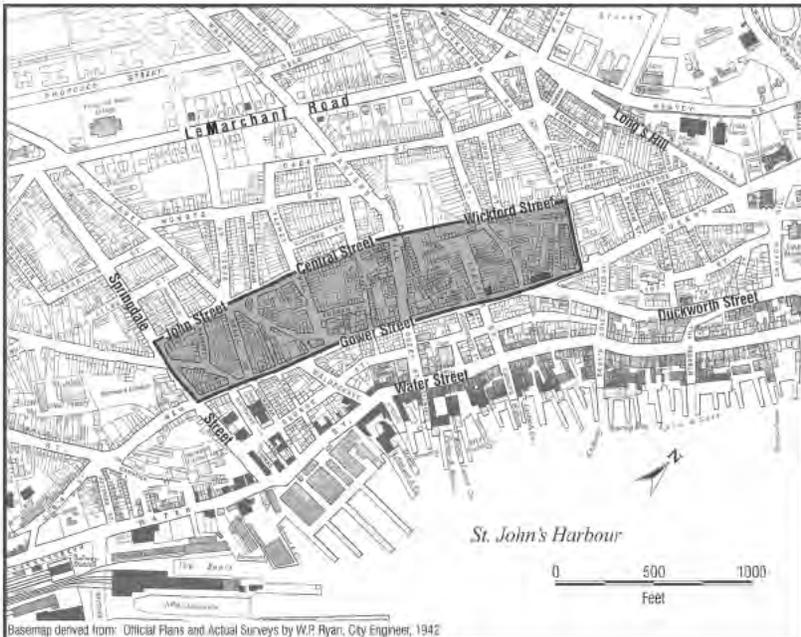


Figure 1.4. The “Inner City,” 1942 (Charles Conway, based on Ryan 1942).

Only the experience of successive fires provided any encouragement for planning: the widening of a few specific streets to serve as fire breaks.

Sir Richard Bonnycastle, a career soldier serving in Newfoundland in 1842, commented: “Take St. John’s altogether, with its 15,000 inhabitants, it has made great progress of late years; and every fire, although entailing much individual loss and suffering, has improved it” (Bonnycastle 1842, 234). Table 1.1 outlines the damage caused by major nineteenth-century fires in the city. Figure 1.5 illustrates their extent.

Date of Fire	Houses Destroyed	People Made Homeless
1816	120	1,000
1817	300	2,000
1819		1,000
1846	2,000	12,000
1892	Unknown, but “2/3 of the city”	11,000

The worst houses were located immediately north of New Gower Street between Carter’s Hill and Springdale Street. They were concentrated on Codner’s and Dammerill’s Lanes, James, Notre Dame, and Simms Streets, the area now occupied by St. John’s City Hall. A long-standing explanation attributed the presence of these dilapidated houses to jerry-building in the aftermath of the 1892 fire (Horwood 1997, 7). This is a misconception. Many of these houses predated even the 1846 fire — James Street was reported to be “thickly settled” in 1845 (JHA 1845, 52; *The Newfoundlander* 4 Jan. 1847). They weren’t burned in 1846 because that fire destroyed only a few houses north of New Gower Street. Then the Great Fire of 1892 stayed east of Carter’s Hill. Ironically, the very poor quality of housing in the area was because the area hadn’t been burned, and the houses, now at least a half-century old, had never been properly maintained.

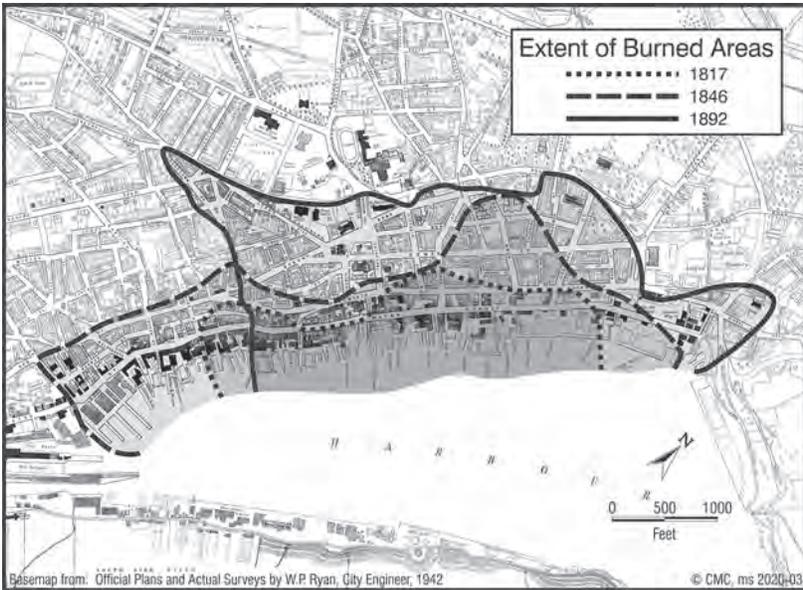


Figure 1.5. Map of the Great Fires of St. John's (Charles Conway).

There was very little straightening or realigning of streets in the windows of opportunity given by the nineteenth-century fires. Property owners were loath to give up land for street widening without meaningful financial compensation. However, they did acknowledge the danger of fire in another way. In the commercial area between Duckworth Street to the harbour, rebuilding after fires was required to be in brick or stone to protect the merchants' premises, the economic engine of the town (Legislation 1851, 1852). As the town grew, wooden houses and tenements were built by landlords on their estates farther away "in the western suburb," which developed beyond the end of Duckworth Street on New Gower Street and on the flank of Barter's Hill. These houses were not built to any particular plan. The 1846 Road Report entry for James Street noted "no regard being paid in laying down the sills of houses in this street, it is difficult to make satisfactory improvements on it, without having several steps descending to some houses and ascending to others" (JHA 1846, 228).



Figure 1.6. Lion Square and Dammerill's Lane (St. John's Insurance Plan, 1893).



Figure 1.7. Looking up Lime Street from New Gower Street, c. 1950 (CSJA 01-13-014).

Houses continued to accumulate on the flank of Barter's Hill for the next 40 years, and by 1888 the area had become a proper neighbourhood. There was both casual and wage employment, and shopping on Water Street had become unnecessary because a neighbourhood shopping area had developed on New

Gower Street: butchers, bakers, grocers, milliners and tailors, a notary public, a watchmaker, and liquor dealers. There were also churches and schools (Sharpe 1885). The houses were often crowded with large extended families and with lodgers. It was usual for children who were able to work to remain in the household well into marriageable age (Oliver 1983; Baker 1983b, 1984c).



Figure 1.8. Looking up Notre Dame Street from New Gower Street, early 1900s (CSJA 04-19-002).



Figure 1.9. Whiteway's Grocery Store, 71 Casey Street at the corner of John Street, 1910s (CSJA 01-11-023).

buildings compleat and in a Workmanlike manner . . . and maintain them” (Job 1818). The leaseholder, in turn, could rent the houses he had built to subtenants for his own rental income during the period of his lease. Some leases were for periods as short as 30 years, others for as long as 99 years. The interests of the landowner were secured by the fact that any buildings erected by the lessee reverted to the landlord at the end of the lease.

In 1903 only 38 per cent of the assessed properties in St. John’s were freehold, most of them concentrated south of Water Street where merchants’ premises predominated. Elsewhere in town leasehold was endemic (Rolfson 2003). Under this system, landlords could increase the value of the property for the benefit of their descendants by accumulating houses on it. The system worked well for the land-owning merchants. It also benefited the leaseholder by giving him security of tenure and protection against increases in rent during the term of the lease. It isn’t hard to understand why landlords were happy to permit groups of closely packed dwellings on their land. To take one local example, the Stripling Estate included the entire east side of Cochrane Street and a considerable length of Gower Street. The rent roll from that estate in 1916 included 207 names (Squires, MUN Coll 250).

This medieval form of landownership was criticized because of an assumed relationship between leasehold land and poor-quality housing. Reformers argued that the quality of urban working-class housing could not be improved until the great entailed estates were broken up and the land tenure converted to freehold (Reeder 1961; Baumann 2000; Cox 2008; Dixon 2009; Home 2009). Critics implied that leasehold land was almost universal in the UK and almost absent in North America. This dichotomy is false, as is the assertion that leasehold tenure was responsible for dilapidated housing. Cannadine (1980) demonstrates that “slums” existed on both sides of the ocean and occurred on both leasehold and freehold land. It is now generally accepted that the continued existence of poor-quality housing and the great difficulties involved in trying to eradicate it are functions of poverty. But this was not understood in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the appalling, overcrowded conditions of the inner city of St. John’s were commonly blamed on the “rapacious exactions of landlordism”

(*Newfoundlander* 25 Oct. 1855). The real estate markets of many major cities in the UK continue to be dominated by landed estates (Tichelar 2018), but the last vestiges of this system in St. John's disappeared in 1990 when leasehold tenure was finally abolished (Legislation 1990).



Figure 1.11. Duggan Street in the 1950s (CSJA 11-02-105).

Absentee Landlords

The leasehold tenure of so many properties in central St. John's was criticized not only because of the perceived intrinsic deficiencies of the system, but also because so much of it was held by absentee landlords (Baker 1986c). Considerable numbers of wealthy merchants with property in Newfoundland, not just in St. John's, had traditionally retired back to the United Kingdom to live off their Newfoundland rents (*DCB MacBraire*). Their affairs on this side of the Atlantic were left in the hands of agents, often lawyers. As long as the flow of rent continued, many landlords ignored what was happening to their properties in St. John's. New-

foundland-based revenue became integrated into the lives of the recipients in the UK. A Newfoundland plantation might be inherited, or used to provide a marriage portion, and could be bought and sold in Devon as well as in Newfoundland (Hardy 2021).

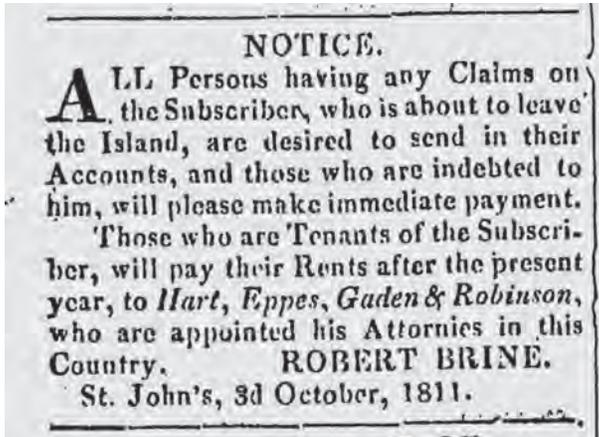


Figure 1.12. A notice from Robert Brine regarding his return to Britain as an absentee landlord (*Royal Gazette and Newfoundland Advertiser* 24 Oct. 1811).

The fact that large portions of downtown St. John's were owned by absentee landlords need not have been a cause for concern, as long as the local agents discharged their duties responsibly. The problem was that, almost to a man, the absentee landlords doggedly opposed the imposition of any form of taxation and so contributed nothing to the Newfoundland government for the expenses of the colony. When the government instigated an inquiry into land tenure in 1882 it discovered that 41 locally owned estates on the south side of Water Street received annual rents totalling \$40,390 while 34 absentee-owned estates in the same area yielded \$65,610 (JHA 1882, 1883). The absentee landlords either ignored their legislated obligation to pay a variety of taxes and assessments or chose to ignore the government's repeated exhortations that they not pass these assessments on to their tenants who could not, or would not, pay them. In many cases

no money was spent on repairs and maintenance, and as time passed many fell into disrepair. Many attempts were made to correct this problem, but they were always successfully resisted by the landlords until St. John's was granted the right to create a municipal government in 1888.



Figure 1.13. Duggan Street and Fergus Place, c. 1950 (CSJA 11-02-034).

Generations passed. Complications arose. Property owners died, and long-term leases of 30 or 40 years became lost in time, perhaps forgotten. In other cases, a multiplicity of heirs claimed a portion of the estate: “On the north side of St. John’s harbour, Squarey’s Plantation, long occupied by Brophy, was divided by inheritance into three to provide income for a gentleman and his wife in Ashburton, a surgeon in Bideford, and a druggist and his wife in Salisbury” (Hardy 2007). The estate of Nicholas Gill, who died intestate in 1855, was not settled until 1985 when 14 descendants claimed an interest (Newfoundland Law Reports 1985). The leasehold system was finally done

away with by the provincial government in 1990, but not before it had caused generations of families to live in terrible conditions that the city was virtually powerless to improve (Legislation 1921, s. 94; Legislation 1990).

Public Health: A Desperate Situation

“Public health” is a nineteenth-century concept that developed in response to the growth of cities and the rise of industrialization in Europe and North America. The rapid movement of people into the cities put a strain on housing, water, and sewerage, all of which impacted the safety, cleanliness, and health of the population. Insanitary conditions and overcrowding became a breeding ground for infectious diseases. In the nineteenth century the Newfoundland government passed a number of Acts dealing with the general promotion of public health, for example: “The speedy abatement of Nuisances” (Legislation 1833); “To provide for the performance of Quarantine” (Legislation 1834a); “. . . respecting the Sanitary Improvement of the Town of St John’s . . .” (Legislation 1879). Eventually, a Board of Health, district surgeons, and hospitals were put in place (*ENL Health; ENL Hospitals*; Baker 1983c).

In addition, the Legislative Assembly passed several Acts specifically designed to promote healthy conditions in St. John’s. For example, burial grounds within the town were closed (Legislation 1849), butchering within the town was banned (Legislation 1860), and inspection of households’ sanitary arrangements was decreed (Legislation 1879). There was inspection of food for sale — fruit, vegetables, bread, butter, and milk — “that it not be diseased or unsound” (Legislation 1880). And both the supply of adequate and pure water (Legislation 1859) and the construction of a sewer system (Legislation 1863) were legislated for St. John’s.

Also important within the broad compass of public health was the long tradition of the government taking responsibility for the poor and indigent (Baker 1982d). This expressed a concern for those under extreme economic or social stress: lack of work, lack of shelter, lack of family support, lack of

fitness. There was also provision for illegitimate children and deserted wives (Legislation 1834c, 1834d). The poor were classed as “casual,” that is, those who were able-bodied and could be employed on casual work such as road-building, or “permanent,” those who were disabled and unfit to work. A chronic problem, arising from the structure of employment and the seasonality of the fishery, was that “the Operative Population attempt to live for twelve months on the labour of three or four months” (JHA 1855, 259).

Water Sources, Sewer Systems, and Nuisance

The unhealthy environment of the town was clearly recognized in 1860 when the area from Carter’s Hill to the Flower Hill firebreak was described as:

An extensive collection of wooden houses closely huddled together, without either sewerage or a sufficient supply of water. . . . Almost entirely occupied with labourers, fishermen and mechanics, persons of limited means, who cannot possibly provide these indispensable requisites for themselves and whose families are exposed to the attacks of disease, owing to the filthy state of the narrow lanes by which these dwellings are separated from each other. (*Newfoundland Express* 5 Nov. 1860)

In 1859 the General Water Company was formed to bring water from George’s Pond on Signal Hill to the town (Legislation 1859). The water was piped to the older, eastern section of the town; the rest of the town continued to depend on public wells. In the 1860s, with heroic effort, a tunnel was blasted and pipes were laid from the town to Windsor Lake to access an endless supply of pure water. In the western section of the town beyond Duckworth Street, on the flank of Barter’s Hill, 17 fountains were provided for use by the poor (Penney 2010; Baker 1982c). Some of these fountains, commonly called “tanks,” remained in service until the end of World War II.



Figure 1.14. Fetching water from the fountain (*Montreal Standard* 23 Nov. 1946).

“Nuisance” has been part of the Newfoundland vocabulary for a long time, referring to “all the Filth, Rubbish, and other offensive matter or things, which may have been deposited in any Street, . . . Lane, or Cove” (Legislation 1833; Story, Kirwin, and Widdowson 1990, 354). Some residents provided their own private sanitary arrangements. Others, the majority, deposited “nuisance” wherever convenient — a privy behind and near the house, under bushes, or into a brook. The many brooks running down the hill above the town and emptying into the harbour had been the first sewers in town. They were handy for depositing waste of any kind. In the early nineteenth century many of these brooks were diverted underground. Some were enlarged and lined with plank or, later, ceramic tile imported from the UK. It seems that the larger ones were used by the public for both drainage and sanitary purposes. “There is much filth &c. thrown on this street, which ought to be prevented. It is, perhaps, owing in a great measure to the want



Figure 1.15. Looking north on James Street to the back of 2-18 Moore Street, 1950s, showing a woman hanging laundry, a dog, a hydrant on the left beside power pole, a “tank” or water fountain to its right, and an open drain (CSJA 11-02-028).

of back yards to the houses on the North side [of Water Street]” (JHA 1841, 178). The many horses that pulled delivery carts throughout the town also contributed to the deposit of “nuisance” in the streets.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the rapid pace of industrialization in the UK and the consequent burgeoning of urban population outstripped the provision of accommodation for the increasing numbers in wage employment at ever-larger work sites. Officials began to recognize the special needs of the changing urban spaces. This led to an urban reform movement that sought to provide local oversight for towns and cities. The UK Municipal Corporation Act of 1835 (5 & 6 Wm. IV c 76) allowed them to apply for incorporation in order to add a layer of government at the local level to deal with their specific needs. These municipal councils would oversee city growth and its ramifications: provision of water and sewer infrastructure, planning of streets, fire protection, and sufficient housing.

At the same time, Newfoundland Governor Sir John Harvey (1841–46) presented the House of Assembly with a list of suggested “improvements” for the town: a regular and abundant supply of pure water for the city — for shipping, and for fire protection; a “commodious road” to connect the east and west ends of the city; a surveyed map of the town; and even a town clock (JHA 1843, 66). Some of these suggestions were adopted. Gower Street was properly extended west beyond Duckworth to open the area of Barter’s Hill for development. Surveyor William R. Noad produced an excellent map of St. John’s (TRPAD MG 93), but municipal incorporation and sewerage infrastructure were not pursued at this time (DCB Harvey).

When Governor LeMarchant (1847–52) arrived in St. John’s in the immediate aftermath of the 1846 fire, he was dismayed to find that the city had no system of drains or sewers specifically for sanitary purposes. All that existed was a privately built patchwork. Residents could and did throw their filth, garbage, and wastewater into drains that flowed down the hill to the harbour. But by mid-century the government began to discuss the institution of a proper system of daily scavenging to collect “night soil” set out on the street by individual households (JHA 1851b, 244–46). LeMarchant hoped to create a system that would give St. John’s the same benefits already enjoyed by the citizens of the larger towns in England after passage of the UK 1848 Public Health Act (11 Victoria c 63), which empowered local boards to pave streets and install sewers where necessary. Unfortunately, the long-standing opposition to the imposition of any property assessment by landowners made it impossible to introduce similar reforms in St. John’s (Baker 1983c, 28). LeMarchant observed that the strong prejudices against direct taxation were a principal reason the legislature was afraid to establish municipalities that could raise money through local assessments (DCB LeMarchant).

Cholera is a virulent bacterial infection of the gut, most commonly caused by the ingestion of fecal matter from an infected person by means of polluted water. It was one of the most feared afflictions of crowded eighteenth- and nineteenth-century cities. A combination of the paving of streets, the disposal of human waste by means of enclosed sewers, and the

provision of potable water eventually brought it under control, although it has never been eliminated. In the summer of 1854, an outbreak of cholera ravaged the town and, according to Governor Keir Baillie Hamilton, left 500 people dead (*ENL Health*). An urgent report on the state of sewerage and drainage in the town put the problem squarely:

The caution to avoid any scheme involving great expense has a paralysing influence when the total absence of any sanitary provisions is borne in mind — no drains — no pavements — . . . no places for the deposit of filth and ordure excepting the surface of unpaved alleys, and a total want of privies; the absence of all these things renders a considerable outlay necessary, particularly when it is remembered that the whole area of the Town is in the same lamentable condition. (*JHA 1854 vol. 2, 12-13*)

By the 1870s sewerage had become an important element in the legislative conversation and some progress had been made in improving the state of public sanitation. A system of night carts was now in place to collect the household buckets and to transport them for dumping in the fields at the edge of town. For liquid waste — the household slops — gratings were put at the entrance to old drainage sewers so that the slops could be emptied into them. In Stephen Street (north of New Gower) “a grating . . . at the entrance to this sewer . . . is a receptacle for all the liquid nuisance that was heretofore thrown broadcast over the surface of a square of unoccupied ground . . . so likely to breed epidemic amongst our inhabitants” (*JHA 1875 vol. 1, 1007*).

Public health reform, and the improvements in sanitation it would eventually bring about, was hampered in St. John’s not only by the aversion to taxation but also by the absence of a municipal government. In 1879 a Joint Committee of the Legislative Council and House of Assembly was appointed “to take into consideration the sanitary condition of the town of St. John’s.” But no matter how obvious the need for a sewer system was and

how many people decried the lack of one, its creation was a formidable task and expense. A Scottish firm was invited to come to St. John's in 1879 to propose a new sewerage scheme and submitted a detailed report. St. John's replied to them that there was "little probability of local contractors undertaking sewerage; large cost causing hesitancy of adoption" (JHA 1880; Baker 1982d, 68). The problem, as always, was the lack of revenue. Until 1888 St. John's, by far the largest town in the colony with a population of 30,000, was completely dependent on the colonial government for the provision of all municipal services except for water supply and fire protection (Baker 1986a, 21)

By the 1880s the deplorable state of public health could no longer be ignored. In 1886 the government engineer reported startling statistics about the ineffectiveness of the poorly designed sewerage infrastructure: "Several drains opened were found filled to the covers with solid material; others had been blocked for years. The house drains, however, continued to discharge even the contents of the water closets into the soil . . . the soil saturated with sewage" (JHA 1886a, 982). He noted that medical opinion considered consumption (tuberculosis) to be the most common disease in the town as a result, and that a new British survey had supported the argument that the incidence of consumption could be reduced by better control of sewage.

Twenty-four towns, sewered by the modern system, were examined. It appeared that, while the general death rate had diminished, it was strikingly evident in the smaller number of deaths from consumption. The scientific world accepted the theory that the purifying of the atmosphere, and the drying of the soil, as an incidental effect of sewerage, had led to the diminution of that disease. (JHA 1886a, 985)

In his address to the Legislative Assembly that same year, Governor Carter observed that "The time appears to have arrived when municipal regulations should be established in the town of St. John's. The particular form

which would best adapt such a measure to local circumstances invites your careful reflection” (JHA 1886b, 13).

Finally, on 9 May 1888, St. John’s was incorporated as a town and given the authority to “carry into effect an improved system of Sewerage . . . and to make provision therefor; [and] . . . to make further provision for the improvement, repairs and maintenance of Streets, Sidewalks and Drains, for the lighting of the Town.” The new municipal government was also given the power to raise revenue by charging assessments for water and sewer services, fire protection, and, ultimately, to impose taxes on property (Legislation 1888).