

# Construction companies in Gander 1935 - 1959

(by Robert G Pelley, version 2, 05 May 2017)

In 1935 Gander was a simple patch of gnarled spruce trees, an occasional evergreen and low-lying shrubs on a barren bog. Roughly 20 years later another start had to be made on basically the same kind of terrain a few miles to the west.

The main problem in the writing of an article on construction in Gander is the absence of information. Private companies tend very much to view “paperwork” as extra baggage. They keep the strict minimum required by law, for example, for tax purposes or land registry and then get rid of it.

Furthermore official studies or documents about Gander quite often do not specify which entities are involved. For example, when one speaks of the number of hangars erected, quite often there is no indication if they are RCAF, RAF or USAAF.

What paperwork that might possibly exist may be in disparate archives and therefore very time consuming – and sometimes expensive – to extract. Unfortunately internet search engines can often be more of a hindrance than a help – for example, the name Belmont Construction gives over a dozen pages. Another major problem is that many of these companies do not exist any more. Simply put, this article is based in many cases on bribes of information from here and there. *Therefore any additional information on any of these companies would be extremely appreciated to make it as accurate as possible.*

Gander went through several waves of development where construction companies did the bulk, if not all, of the work. However

in the earliest stages, workers were hired directly by the Administration and not via contractors.

Gander's construction history from 1935-59 had several specific periods:

- the first was the building of an airport under civilian authorities
- this was followed by the conversion to a military facility
- the final stage was the general demilitarisation of airport, with the parallel development of a brand-new, architecturally sophisticated terminal and a completely new town.

There were quite a number of construction companies that worked in Gander over the years. These included notably:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Atlas</li><li>◦ Belmont</li><li>◦ Concrete Products</li><li>◦ Eastern Woodworkers</li><li>◦ Fraser-Brace</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Kenney</li><li>◦ McNamara (Montreal)</li><li>◦ North-Shore Construction</li><li>◦ Pentagon</li></ul>
--	--

### **Section one - early construction under civilian authority**

In an Air Ministry note of 21 March 1936 entitled "Trans-Atlantic Air Service : Land Aerodromes in Newfoundland and the Irish Free State", the cost of preparing the land and constructing an airport in 1936 was estimated at 263,462 pounds sterling. Development of the site was expected to take nine months spread out over two summers.

The early history of Gander is fairly well known. For example, the table of contents of the present website points to photos of work in progress in the late 30s and as well presents a copy of the original report of 15 November 1935 by TA Hall and Alan Vatcher, explaining the interest of the site actually chosen.

- <http://bobsganderhistory.com/hv.html>
- <http://bobsganderhistory.com/constrphotos.html>

The photo below shows Gander in its earliest stages, when brush was cut and basic levelling had been done. The basic outlines of the runways can be seen. (circa May 1938)



The initial work commenced under the supervision of Mr Vatcher who was replaced in 1937 by another engineer, Mr Woodyet. The main priority was the construction of the runways.

The basic operation was as follows:

- ° deliver crushed stone by train from Hall's Quarry near Benton, 10 miles east,
- ° do any other on-site crushing required,
- ° take livery of asphalt delivered in railway tank cars from the COLAS plant in Clarendville,
- ° transfer this liquid asphalt by truck to on-site mixers and then
- ° bring this asphalt mix to the spreaders.



Colas tankers on a siding in Gander

Mr Woodyet was replaced temporarily by Mr Nicolas Paton, but in April 1938, a new resident engineer, Mr F.C. Jewett, replaced Mr Paton. He brought with him Robert Bradley as assistant, KR Chestnut as draftsman and surveyor and Ken Rose as Outside Superintendent.

It is interesting to note that Mr Jewett later went to Air Defence Headquarters in Ottawa as responsible for all RCAF airfields during the war.

Mr Fred W Smeaton became Works Superintendant and was therefore responsible for the general construction and every day running of operations. He was assisted by Tom Lannon. Mr Roland Pinsent was appointed superintendent over all heavy equipment.



Squadron/Leader H.A.L. Pattison, a signals specialist, became in 1938 the first Airport Manager. No information has been found on the exact relationship between the airport manager and other authorities at that time.

During this period, the construction work force had risen to around 500 and work was speeded up to meet an October 1939 deadline. The first permanent structures erected included Administration Building and the adjacent powerhouse and heating plant. Just next door was the first hangar, round-roofed Hangar 20, which had then had the largest door in the world, 150 feet wide and 30 feet high. Although it weighed several tons, it could be raised and lowered by a 2-hp motor.

An air-radio transmitter site with 150-ft towers was built about two kms to the east of the administration building. To avoid radio interference, the receiver site was about three kilometres to the west of the transmitters.

Construction workers lived as well as they could in tar-paper shacks.



Gander staff, with tar-paper shacks behind.  
F Saint, J Baldwin, C Robertson, G Butt, C Warren, D Cuff

In his initial report Alan Vatcher gave the following as probable pay rates during the construction of the airport:

The following are some current rates of wages:

Concrete Superintendent		.50¢	per hour		
Foreman over common labour		.36	"	"	
Mason		.50	"	"	
Blacksmith		.36	"	"	
"	Helper	.27	"	"	
Carpenter		30¢ to	.45	"	"
Mechanic		30¢	"	.42	"
"	Helper	27¢	"	.30	"
Motor Machine Operator		34¢	"	.44	"
Teamster 25¢, Horse 20¢				.45	"
Labourer		25¢	"	.30	"
Blaster				.34	"
Timekeeper		\$75.00 to \$100.00		per month	
Cook				75.00	"
Storekeeper				100.00	"

Four double houses were constructed on Chestnut Avenue for the married personnel and for the airport manager. Single staff members such as radio and meteorological staff, the resident engineer and his staff were fairly well accommodated in the Administration building.

Paving of all four runways was completed by October 1939 and all was ready for both military and commercial planes that would some day arrive. Construction work being complete, the Engineering staff returned to the mainland, with only an operating staff remaining, under the supervision of the airport manager.

When the RCAF later took over the airport, it was noted that the capital cost for the civilian airport was over 900,000 pounds sterling.

## **Section two - militarisation of Gander**

During this period, construction was guided by military priorities. During the earliest period, no airplanes, civilian or military, were able to fly the Atlantic.

The British were pushing hard for early construction of the airport as they figured they were well ahead of the Americans, with what they thought was a good trans-Atlantic aircraft waiting in the wings. However, this DeHavilland-made plane, the “Albatros”, made of plywood like famous Mosquito bomber, was not up to snuff and the impending war cut off its development.



The Americans were also working hard on aircraft capable eventually able to fly across the Atlantic, such the Douglas DC-4/C-54 passenger/cargo and the B-17 and B-24 bombers, but they all required another year or so of refinement.

The Germans even had a plane ready to go. On 10/11 August 1939, the FW 200, upgraded with extra fuel tanks, was the first heavier-than-air aircraft to fly nonstop between Berlin and New York City. Needless to say it would not have been welcome in Gander.

In September 1939, Gander was, so to speak, on stand-by for events to come. The movement of aircraft was still civilian oriented with a small single engine plane attempting to fly across the Atlantic and two former Harrow bombers testing in-flight refuelling of flying-boats using Botwood.

The arrival on 10 February 1940 of two RCAF Hudsons with senior officers on a reconnaissance mission signalled the start of the “military period”. Canadian Army Engineers set up infantry and anti-aircraft artillery camps. An RCAF anti-submarine squadron started moving in as of mid-June 1940.

At the same time, efforts were underway to look more closely at sending military aircraft across the Atlantic. In a response to Lord Beaverbrook who headed Britain’s Ministry of Aircraft Production, in mid-July 1940, Canadian Pacific Railways decided to give all support possible to the ferry operations across the Atlantic with the creation of a dedicated operation, known as the Canadian Pacific Air Service.

One could say therefore that in the early 1940’s, there were really two distinct construction efforts going on at the same time, one dedicated to the needs of the RCAF maritime warfare units and the other in support of the ferry operations. By 1941 another element was added, namely the construction needed to support the newly arriving US Army Air Force.

It would appear that during this wartime period, there were three construction companies on the ground (but it is not easy to determine who did what and who paid the bills). These were :

- ° McNamara
- ° Belmont
- ° Atlas

## **Section 2.1 - McNamara Construction Company (de Montreal)**

McNamara is best known from the name of a site that once existed near the south end of runway 07-29, roughly a kilometer or so SSW of the present terminal. At the end of the war accommodation was at a premium. McNamara’s transferred the property to Concrete Products Ltd which then leased the tar-papers shacks to private citizens.

Available documents say only that McNamara of Montreal worked on a “defense contract” without specifying its nature. But this McNamara’s camp story leads us to an important fact, namely that McNamara’s had operated there a quarry and crusher. “Normal” construction companies in a place like Gander would likely not have



needed a very large quantity of crushed stone where buildings generally did not have basements.



Photo entitled “south section quarry”

There were four post offices in Gander, one of which was set up near McNamaras, attesting to a war-time “south camp” of a certain population.

This is little in Gander-related documents which describe the type of work carried out. However, two points concerning St John’s may provide a clue.

Firstly, in 1941, McNamara Construction Company began construction of two runways, taxiways, aprons and other related facilities in Torbay.

As well, the official dispatch no 303, dated 30 June 1944, from the High Commissioner in Newfoundland to the Canadian Secretary of State for External affairs mentions particularly a problem of roads in St. John's, having been deteriorated by military traffic. The author writes "I have discussed the road situation at some length with the Manager of the McNamara Construction Company which is now engaged in carrying out paving work on two of the cities thoroughfares".

Equally, though the runways in Gander were officially completed by October 1939, there were always repairs and extensions to be made. For example, in the Journal of discussions and decisions of the Canada-US Permanent Joint Board on Defense of 10/11 November 1941, the "Canadian Air Force" member reported that "the clearing and grubbing of three runways at Gander Lake to a total length of 6000 feet is to be undertaken during the present winter and it was agreed that a recommendation as to further action would be considered at the February meeting of the Board."

There was therefore a need in Gander for an organization able to offer the know-how, the personnel and the equipment necessary to maintain and develop the runways. It would appear that given its quarry, the probable number of employees and its expertise, McNamara would be an excellent choice. As well, Mr Cliff Powell, who lived in McNamara camp at the end of the war, and Max Lush, both still Gander residents, remember McNamara as a paving company.

Given (a) that the RCAF member of the above mentioned Board was able to report on the situation and that (b) the RCAF took over the responsibility for the airport on 01 April 1941, it is safe to assume that McNamara's activities were controlled and financed by Canadian government authorities.

It is interesting to note however that we have come across the obituary of a gentleman who started working for McNamara Construction Company of *Toronto* in 1958 and says that he worked on the new terminal being constructed in Gander. No link was found between McNamara of Montreal and of Toronto, though that is not impossible.

Also, Collections Canada lists a document concerning a McNamara Construction Company in Gander in September 1957 as being involved in a labour-relations problem.

## **Section 2.2 - Belmont Construction Company**

The aviation activity in Gander as of 1940 was very much all oriented towards the eventual delivery of military aircraft to Europe. While the RAF believed it could not be done, Britain's Lord Beaverbrook heading the British Ministry of Aircraft Production (MAP) contacted his friends at Canadian Pacific in early 1940 to investigate what it would take to be able to fly land based airplanes across the Atlantic, even in the middle of the winter.

As mentioned, Canadian Pacific Railways decided July 1940 to give all support possible to the ferry operations across the Atlantic with the creation of a dedicated operation, known as the Canadian Pacific Air Service. CPR would provide ground personnel, supplies and administrative support, while the Ministry was to be responsible for management and crews, and would reimburse all expenses other than salaries, the whole operation remaining a purely civilian undertaking. On 11 November 1940, their first trans-Atlantic delivery of seven Lockheed Hudsons was made successfully.

On 10 May 1941, the ferry operations were taken over directly by the British Ministry of Aircraft Production (MAP) itself through its ATFERO (Atlantic ferrying organization). The Canadian Pacific agreement was thereby terminated.

ATFERO itself was short-lived, since the Royal Air Force Ferry Command assumed this responsibility as of 01 August 1941. ATFERO personnel were incorporated as civilian or military personnel.

To get the ferry service operational required hangars, ground facilities and accommodation. Initially these organizations worked out of the

Administration Building and hangar 20. The Eastbound Inn was erected just next door with 30 rooms in December 1940. In a document from the Governor of Newfoundland to the Dominions Secretary of 05 March 1941, mention is made of the inadequacy of these aviation and personal accommodations.

More precisely, a memorandum from the MAP representative in Canada to the Canadian Minister of National Defense, dated 20 February specifies a requirement for additional quarters and two hangars.

To deal with these matters, as mentioned in a MAP document dated 03 June 1941, the construction program in Gander was personally supervised by Mr John Schofield, chief architect of Canadian National Railways who had built all the Trans-Canada Air Line facilities across Canada. He was seconded by a JH Norris, well needed as the construction program involved “an expenditure approximating five millions dollars”.

It would appear that the major, if not sole, contractor for this construction was the Belmont Construction Company. In fact in very early Gander, before the RAF was really set up, the RAF area was commonly known as “Belmont Camp”.

The map below from the early 1940's clearly shows the Belmont designation. Equally shown is the MAP ownership of what was later called the RAF area.



In the photo below from June 1942 of the Belmont/RAF area, we can see a row of seven long single-story buildings that were used as accommodation during the construction period. A close inspection reveals the construction of this area is not yet completed, for example several building north of the hangars and the tower.



I have been told, but can not confirm, that after completion of the RAF area construction, before the actual end of the war and probably mid-1944, much of the wood from these barracks was used to build small homes and cabins around the area, not necessarily approved by airport authorities.

In the “Memorandum of Agreement between Canada and Newfoundland respecting the transfer of Air Bases” of 07 April 1941, it was provided that “the Canadian Government shall not be responsible for providing the marine facilities at the base on Gander Lake to be operated by the Atlantic Ferry Organization”. This probably would have been another task carried out by Belmont Construction, during the time that Capt Ian Ross ran the CPR Air Service.

It would appear therefore that construction in what became known as the RAF area was controlled by engineers from CPR Air Services, ATFERO and later the RAF, done by Belmont and financed by the British Ministry of Aircraft Production.

## **Section 2.3 - Atlas Construction Company**

The history of Atlas in Newfoundland did not start in Gander. Botwood for example already had been set up as a civilian flying boat base and Atlas constructed a military base there beginning in the latter half of 1939. Two hangars were built to accommodate six PBV Catalinas and later in the year, ammunition bunkers and army barracks were constructed. Atlas was also quite involved with the development later on of the base in Goose Bay.

With respect to Gander, the government of Newfoundland was more aggressive than either London or Ottawa. On September 15, 1939, it contacted London pointing out that the new Newfoundland airport at Gander was certain to be useful in the war effort, but that Newfoundland did not have the resources to do much about it. London did not concur, fearing that this might help Pan American Airways in its competition with Imperial Airways/BOAC.

Hitler's invasion of France changed the scenario. Canada was the first to agree with Newfoundland. On 10 February 1940, a reconnaissance party of senior RCAF officers landed in Gander. After rapid inter-governmental discussions, on 14 June 1940, Ottawa sent a formal offer to the Governor of Newfoundland to station air and ground forces at Gander. This expected offer was promptly accepted and in a matter of days, five aircraft of 10 Bomber Reconnaissance Squadron, operating Digbys, arrived under command of S/L Carscallen and a battalion of infantry had disembarked at Botwood and was en route for Gander.

The RCAF obtained permission from the Commission Government to expand the airport, and began work almost immediately. At a cost of \$1.3 million, it installed additional hangars, barracks, and storage spaces, and upgraded existing utilities. The Nfld government also agreed to:

- ° a radio range station three miles out from the main runway 07-29
- ° a sewerage disposal plant north of the railway tracks
- ° a water supply pumped from Gander Lake, with local reservoirs
- ° anti-aircraft sites, with accommodation for personnel
- ° gasoline storage with the necessary railway spurs

It would appear that because Atlas was already in Botwood, the imperatives of war meant that it was already able to get to Gander earlier in the year to size up what it might need for operations and to pre-position equipment for shipment. They were therefore ready to move at the drop of a hat.

A report on defence relations dated 20 January 1941 gives the situation with respect to action by the RCAF as follows:

*Action has been taken to hasten construction of works and buildings at Newfoundland Airport, but bad weather, sickness and lack of shipping in the past has retarded construction. The contractor now has 800 men on the job.*

*The contractor states he will have one double hangar ready for occupation and accommodation for 31 Officers and 200 men ready by 1st March, 1941.*

The work done by Atlas on behalf of the RCAF had to be carried out in such a way as not to interfere with ferry operations, which did not appear to be a major challenge. But the situation was developing in Gander, as a new entity was about stick its nose in the door.

In a meeting of the Canadian War Cabinet on 13 December 1940, the Associate Minister of National Defence report that the US general staff were likely to ask that the US be granted a long term lease at or near "Newfoundland Airport". The War Cabinet however disagreed with this, not wishing to give the US anything that might look like a longterm claim on Gander.

However on 25 January 1941, the Secretary of State for External Affairs wrote to the Governor of Newfoundland "... following urgent representations received from United States authorities as to the necessity for their forces having training and experience in the Newfoundland area, the Canadian Government has agreed to erect additional buildings at the Airport adequate for the accommodation and training of American composite group of approximately 300 officers, 1050 men and 73 aircraft." ..... "The cost will be borne by Canada".... "In the meantime, the Canadian Government would

appreciate the Newfoundland Government signifying its general concurrence in the matter subject to details to be worked out.”

According to a document from the War Cabinet a week later “... this additional accommodation involved estimated expenditure of \$4,000,000, beyond that which had already been authorized and undertaken by the Canadian government for this purpose”....”The Committee expressed general agreement with Mr. Power’s recommendation in this respect, it being pointed out that the principle of providing for U.S. forces in Newfoundland, *at Canadian expense*, had already been approved...”

The construction by Atlas of the facilities for the Americans was therefore paid for by the government of Canada. Canada did want not any permanent US claim on the airport and was loath to give any sort of lease.

In any case, under American law, the US government was not free to incur expenditure for works on land to which it has no title. It was for this reason that the accommodation for the US forces in Gander was provided by Canada.

A document from the Permanent Joint Defence Board (PJDB) on 27 February 1941 says that a senior officer of the US Army Engineering Corps consulted with the R.C.A.F. and approved a building layout. The contractor is arranging for the employment of an additional 1,500 men to speed up the construction programme.

Work progressed rapidly during the summer of 1941 and documents mention the use of hangars 5 and 6 by the RCAF. These hangars were just west of the Banting Memorial Hospital, between the main road and the runway.

A Permanent Joint Defence Board briefing note explains the situation as of 9-10 September 1941.



*Newfoundland Airport*

Construction is progressing satisfactorily.

Four hangars have already been completed and are now occupied. The foundations for four others are completed and steel erection has commenced on three.

	Completed and occupied	Under Construction
Quarters		
Officers	4 (147)	3 (264)
N.C.O.	4 (176)	0
O.R.	7 (952)	6 (2128)
Messes		
Officers	1 ( 50)	1 (300)
N.C.O.	1 (120)	1 ( 40)
O.R.	1 (450)	2 (1440)
Other Buildings	13	41

The foundations of all the rest of the buildings are now being installed and it is anticipated that all buildings will be completed by the end of the year.

The foundations for the new power house are completed and erection of machinery has commenced.

The 10" pipeline to Gander Lake is all laid and foundations for the pumping station in hand.

Excavation has been completed on the sewage disposal plant and construction is progressing rapidly.

Spur lines to all power plants and gasoline and coal supplies are well in hand.

Roads are being brought up to grade and surfaced with shale.

Authority has been granted for a certain amount of aerodrome maintenance on some of the runways which were deteriorating slightly.

But work done quickly in a wartime environment can have its dangers as can be see from the photos below from October 1941.

Oct 19<sup>th</sup> 1941



Construction Shack Fire

Oct 19<sup>th</sup> 1941



In 1942 there was precious little about construction in documents consulted. Worked continued at a steady rate. Atlas did its job and the US maintenance engineers were allowed to perform minor repairs to the installations provided by Canada.

In late autumn of 1942 the RCAF daily diary noted a fire in the Atlas tractor garage and in another building with minor damage, in both cases. However, a civilian working for Atlas was killed at the stone crusher.

In 1943 work continued as planned, with several points noted in RCAF documents. In early February the bomb storage area constructed was completed. On 13 November, the RCAF supervising engineer reported the following progress during the year:

Completed	Additions
#36 stop butt,	#42 dental clinic
#168 Airport Control Tower	#89 fire hall
#164 Officers quarters	leanto of hangars 5
#165 Airmen's canteen	leanto of hangars 6.
#169 transmitter	
#161 pumphouse	
night vision trainer room	
Drem (?) lighting system	
bomb stores fence	

Concerning Hangar 13, by mid-December the ramps, taxiways and steel frame were completed, as was a large part of the interior. The next day a fire broke out in a tar pot next it that was extinguished rapidly by the fire dept. It was not officially finished until 18 May 1944.

Hal Pattison who had previously been airport manager and was at the time liaison officer for the Nfld government made a progress report at the end of the year. Sections referring to construction can be seen below. (Use zoom if required,)

(b) It is understood that all expenses in connection with works for the United States have been met from Canadian funds. In fact, United States buildings have been covered by the same contract as that for the Canadian buildings;

(c) An area at Gander has been allotted to the United States and all their facilities, that is hangars, workshops, messes, living accommodation, etc., are self-contained in this area;

(d) Originally 10 hangars were set aside for the United States, but owing to overcrowding on the Canadian side it would appear that 2 have been loaned back to the R.C.A.F.

(e) The United States facilities now include:

- 8 hangars
- 1 self-contained hospital
- Officers, N.C.O's and men's messes
- do do quarters
- United States employed civilian messes & quarters
- Theatre
- Recreational facilities

The total number of United States officers, enlisted men and employed civilians is about 2000. The total cost of these buildings is about six million dollars.

(f) Certain common services are shared, such as:

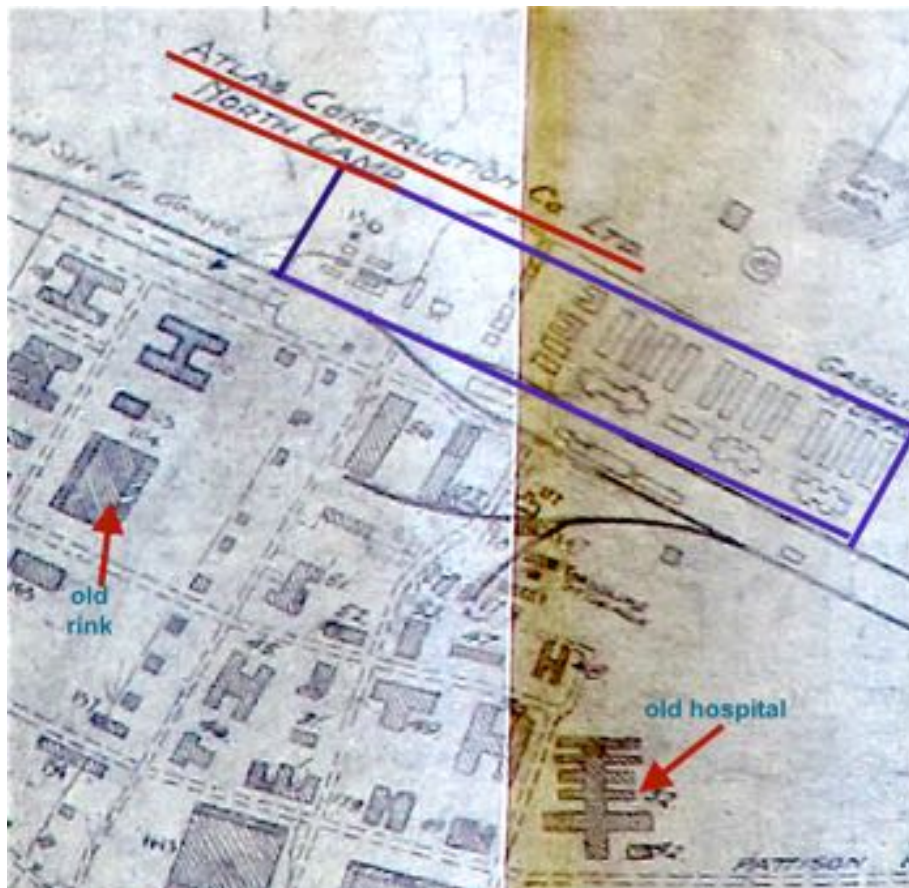
- Roads
- Sewerage
- Water and power lines
- Railways
- Bakery
- Laundry
- Dry Cleaning

The total cost of these common services would appear to be about four million dollars, and it would be fair to assume half the cost on account of the United States camp.

In 1944, with the exception of a power plant #162 to the west of the Army side, construction by Atlas was pretty much finished. Some maintenance was done but from spring onward the priority of Atlas was to pull out.

On 04 August RCAF Works and Maintenance reported resuming the tearing down, with the help of civilian labour, of the buildings of the Atlas South camp. At the end of the same month, authority was received to transfer all civilian employees of the RCAF to barracks on the Army side from the old Atlas North Camp, paving the way for its demolition.

The Atlas South camp was very close to the McNamara camp described earlier. The North Camp was just across the railway track from the Canadian/RCAF side as shown on the map that follows. The old rink and hospital are shown as reference points for those who may have some familiarity with the layout of the time.



By the end of 1944 Atlas had for all intents and purposes left Gander, leaving behind what would soon become the dream of a busy civilian life.

After the Second World War, the new construction in Gander was based on two different areas:

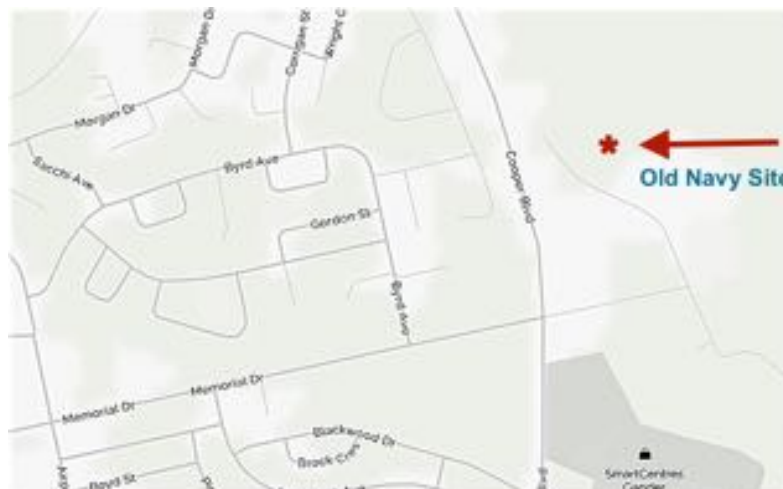
- The changes to “Old Gander”
  - ° modification of the role of the military
  - ° building of a new terminal and runways
  
- The building of the new town
  - ° construction done by commercial enterprises
  - ° construction of private homes by homeowners

### **Section three – changes to “Old Gander”**

Each of these stages of development can be more or less associated with a single or at least limited number of constructors.

#### **Section 3.1 - Modification of the military role**

With respect to the military, the main construction was of course in the area known during the war and for some time after as the “American hospital”. But before going there, it would be appropriate to look at a much lesser-known place, that of the Old Navy Site, which employed many Ganderites when it was called the “Receiving site” during the war.



During the war, the receiving site and the Naval Radio Station (NRS) co-existed. At the end of the war the NRS consisted of 4 buildings, 4 sailors and a few civilian personnel. After Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, the NRS became a permanent Canadian operation. As well In June 1949 the first USN sailors reported for duty at NRS Gander.

This change in role as a member of the CAN-US Atlantic High Frequency Direction Finding Network led to a fair amount of construction. Between 1945 and 1952, a 3-bay garage, a storage building, an inflammable storage area, a carpenter shop, electronics stores and an auxiliary power unit building were erected. As well, three duplex permanent married quarters were constructed. It is unknown if this was done by military personnel or via civilian contract.

The photo below is of the original receiving station.



But the main military construction done during the period was not that of NRS receiving site - but rather that of the radar base.

On a previous article concerning an EC-121 radar plane that had an accident in Gander, mention was made of the Pinetree radar line. Gander was pretty much its eastern anchor, based on the 226 Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron, which was a ground control interception radar site. While the functional and administrative control of the squadron was under the RCAF, the operational control was exercised by the USAF 64<sup>th</sup> Air Division.

The construction of the site started in the spring of 1952. The contract for the construction phase was awarded to Fraser Brace Construction Limited of Montreal by the US government, who bore the entire cost of the project. An engineer of the USAF oversaw the contractor during the construction.

This construction was carried out on the American side near the old hospital.



The construction of the radar station resulted in the erection of several new buildings and the renovation of several existing buildings such as the old hospital, which was converted in Headquarters, Corporals Club, Airmen's Mess and storage. This building was again renovated in 1958 and accommodations were added for Senior NCOs and Officers.

The following photo shows the radar base in the mid-1950's. The old American hospital is in the top right hand corner. The road just above is the main road between the town and the airport terminal.



At the same time 123 Permanent Married Quarters were built in the new town of Gander. As far as is known, Fraser Brace also built these PMQs.

For security reasons, Fraser-Brace employees had to be identified before gaining access to the work and wore a badge as shown below.





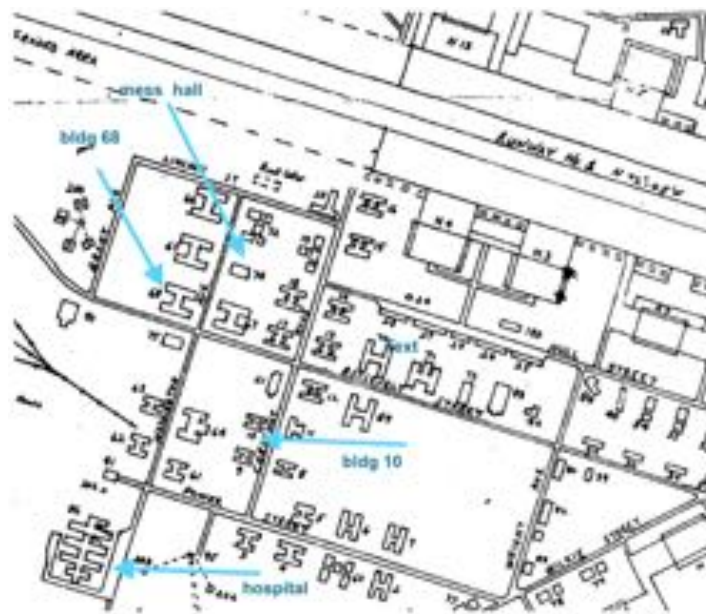
(This badge could have been from a different job.)

During the construction period, Fraser Brace occupied a number of buildings, including several on the American side but also two on the opposite side of the airfield in the RAF zone. Here is a list these buildings with the names of several people who lived there, possibly but not necessarily company employees.

Area	Bldg	Occupants
American side	10	RJ Allen, George Crocker, Patrick Fewer
	68	
	74	
RAF	TC-7	Lewis Reid
	TC-9	

Building 68 was a two-story barrack formerly used as an Esso residence.

An old American gymnasium, bldg 74, was converted to a mess hall. The cook was called “Big Joe”, who always seemed to have a spare pound of butter in a pocket somewhere. Apparently he wasn’t much good though at counting and occasionally made too many blueberry and lemon meringue pies, which he didn’t have the heart to throw out, so he had to share them with to local folks across the fence.



To be noted that one person contacted thought that the mess hall was run by North Shore. It could possibly have fed both companies.

Another employee of Fraser Brace was AJ “Jim” Lewington, who later became managing director of Eastern Provincial Airways. He had left DOT in 1951 to go with Fraser Brace, eventually working in Gander as Transportation and Communications Manager for the company. There may also have been a senior manager by the name of Viscount. Hubert Mercer from Conception Bay moved to Gander to work with Fraser Brace and acted as Carpenter Forman.

Fraser-Brace was not the only company to work on the radar project in Gander. A company by the name Pentagon also was in on the action – it would appear that their priority would have been the radar and electronics but this rests to be confirmed. The name of one of their employees was Ted Kelly.

### **Section 3.2 - Building a new terminal and runways**

After the war, as civilian traffic increased, it became evident the terminal in Hangar 22 was insufficient and that there was little possibility for expansion in that area. Equally, the runways, at the limit of length for military bombers, were even less able to accommodate civilian airliners. Pan American in particular complained about having

to reduce payload due to short runways, in order to take off with a full load of fuel.

It was therefore necessary to redo the runways to new specifications, to tear down most of the structures on the old American side, and to build a new terminal.

All this was carried out by three different construction companies:

- ° North Shore Construction
- ° Concrete Products Limited
- ° Kenny Construction

As for the North Shore Construction Company, precious little is known about what did, except to say it worked primarily on runway extension. It would appear that in the mid-50s, they notably did the extension on the east-west runway, known then as 14-32, bringing it to 8900 ft.

Concrete Products Ltd as well worked on the development of Gander after the war. Unfortunately, the company itself, presently headquartered in St. John's, has no records of its activity in Gander. However, it would appear that their work was done outside the terminal building.

In Gander the word generally used for the "parking area" just next to the terminal building was the "ramp", though certain persons, depending on the airline they worked for, might well prefer to call it the tarmac or the apron. When the first flight of B-29 Super-fortress bombers arrived in Gander in early 1944, the aircraft were so heavy that several broke through the tarmac in the parking area. However, while no damage was done to the planes, it pointed out the importance of strengthening the surface, especially in the case of Gander, which had to be able to take the heaviest of modern jets.

In the new terminal area, it was apparently Concrete Products who had this responsibility. On an airfield there are three main aircraft movement areas: the runways, taxiways and the ramp – it is possible that Concrete Products also did work related to the taxiways. It should be noted however that, as explained earlier, a McNamara of

Toronto also did work in that area, so who did what in that area is rather unclear.

Concrete Products possibly did work as well in the town - with their distinctively painted vehicles. Thanks therefore to Concrete Products of St. John's for the photos below of a forlorn pickup abandoned somewhere in the woods around Gander.



The new terminal itself was basically the work of another enterprise. The Kenney Construction Company Ltd. of Yarmouth, NS, owned by James Kenney and his son Seymour, was awarded the contract. It is hard to read but this is the cut from the St. John's Daily News of 18 November 1955.



It reads: "A contract for a new terminal building at the transport department's Gander airport in Newfoundland has been awarded at a cost of \$2,750,000. The tender was awarded to Kenney Construction Company of Yarmouth, N.S."

The next day the Daily News published a second article saying a contract was awarded for Gander Airport for 1.5 million\$. It is unknown to what degree this was related to the terminal building itself. However, the cost of the building as such is generally given as being in the order of 3m\$, so the 1.5m\$ is quite likely related work.



The architects were Durnford, Bolton, Chadwick and Ellwood of Montreal. Their job was turn into blueprints the government's desire to show Canada was a modern and sophisticated society. The departures lounge was the focal point of the airport incorporating such striking elements as a 72-foot mural, terrazzo floors, and modernist furniture by renowned Canadian and international designers like Robin Bush, Jacques Guillon, Arne Jacobsen and Charles and Ray Eames. The mural was done on the spot by Kenneth Lockhead, using paint tempered with over 500 eggs.



Members of the Kenney Construction Company of Yarmouth were contacted but, unfortunately, there are no known records or photos of this project among family members. However James' step-son, Jack Scott, was able to share personal memories of his part in the ordering, delivery and payment for the work that was done there.

One memory is that of ordering sheets of 4x12-foot plywood, large enough to accommodate the mural by Ken Lockhead, ordered from Montreal and air freighted to Gander at great expense. Ordering supplies from afar meant transport by boat, rail or air. The trans Canada highway system was not yet open in Newfoundland during that time. Sometimes shipments would get lost or end up in a

warehouse with added costs incurred for storage. They would eventually get sorted out and moved to their final destinations.

Mr Scott said that most of the labour for the terminal project was hired locally, under the direction of a project manager named Lionel Comeau, apparently a gentleman from New Brunswick.

Payments for goods and services were sometimes delayed. When Kenny paid a vendor by check, that same check would be passed on to subsequent vendors as payment for bills incurred. By the time the bank returned that original checks issued by Kenney Construction, it was often endorsed for payment for other bills using the same check. Sometimes it a single check would have eight or nine endorsements on the back, which according to Mr Scott, was common in those days.



Upon completion of the Gander airport project, members of the Kenney family were among the invited guests for the June 1959 official opening by Queen Elisabeth 2.

According to Mr Scott, it is also possible that Kenney Construction participated in the erection of certain buildings in the first shopping centre.

## **Section four – the new townsite**

The “old town” of Gander was based on hurriedly constructed military buildings that would have cost a fortune to renovate. Equally, authorities believed that in the context of the Cold war, it would be best to clearly separate the airport and the town.

The buildings in the new town were erected by both commercial enterprises and, in the case of many residences, by the owners themselves.

### **Section 4.1 Commercial construction of the new town**

The main commercial enterprise was Easter Woodworkers. The company was formed in Denmark, Nova Scotia in 1938 by three brothers, Harold, Ernest and Dudley Mingo. Based on their experience with prefabricated huts for the Canadian Army, they came up with a design for residential homes.

Eastern Woodworkers, under Dudley Mingo, started work in Gander in 1952. The first order was for the British Overseas Airline Corporation for 31 pre-fabs to house the airlines' personnel. The houses were 40 ft by 24 ft. with three bedrooms, a dining room, living room, kitchen and bathroom. They were constructed of 159 wall and roof panels, mostly 4' X 8". Wall panels were of 2" x 3" spruce and covered with 5/16" plywood outside and 1/4" plywood inside.

Dudley's daughter Audrey provided this anecdote that proves that doing business between an old town and a new one is not always easy!



“He had a bulldozer shipped in from New Glasgow. He waited and waited for it to arrive, he would call and call the guy at the railway station, no bulldozer. So one day Dad went to the station, there was his dozer, on a flatbed, parked on a siding. He asked the guy why didn't he let him know it was there. The CN guy said he wondered who owned it. Another reason Dad used to throw up his arms and shake his head.”

A listing of buildings done by Eastern Woodworkers in Gander is shown below.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Details</b>	<b>Cost \$</b>
52-53	50 houses	528,111
53-54	50 houses	540,359
54-55	30 houses	324,884
54	Transmitter bldg, power house, PAR (?), SASR(?) and related work	228,967
55	Royal Bank	42,500
55	Hickman Motors	89,957
55	11 housing units	---
55-57	116 housing units DOT	1,168,297
55	CBG radio bldg	46,300
55	Anglican church	8,622
55-57	Crescent theatre (Mr Leahy)	130,921
55-57	T Eaton store	230,035
56-57	St Joseph's school	358,027
56-57	Amalgamated school	654,672
56	3 houses for KLM	43,500
57	96 houses	1,154,953
57	S Joseph's church basement	46,190
57	McGregor House on Alcock	13,650

The well-known photo below shows the first Gander shopping centre with the T Eaton store middle left, with the Royal Bank just to the right of the lane. The Crescent theatre is in the middle of the same section, in line with the road leading into the background,

On the very bottom left of the photo the four houses are, from top to bottom, the Grimes house, Dudley Mingo of Eastern Woodworkers, Eli Baker who became town manager and Lionel Comeau, superintendant of Kenney Construction.



## **Section 4.2 – Residential construction by the owners**

There were in fact were two “residential building booms”. The earliest was in a section not considered at the time to be in Gander but later the new town grew and eventually incorporated it. It was called variously the Glenwood Road area, Memorial Drive area, Hillcrest and Beaverwood.

This development was facilitated by the “Veterans Land Act, 1942” whose object was to aid veterans get re-established after the war. With only a small down payment, ex-servicemen could purchase farmland or even substitute commercial fishing for full-time farming. Repayment terms allowed settlers time to re-establish themselves without incurring heavy financial obligations. In 1950 the VLA began to provide loans to veterans who wished to construct their own homes.

It was extended to Newfoundland veterans who served in the Second World War when the province became part of Canada.

If anyone would like “get into the mood of the times” concerning Veterans Land Act, there is a good video here:

[https://www.nfb.ca/film/home\\_to\\_the\\_land/](https://www.nfb.ca/film/home_to_the_land/)

The prime mover of this idea was Edgar Baird, who had spent time in the RAF and had developed a number of local businesses. He was supported in this endeavour notably by Cy Rowsell, also an RAF veteran.

During the war, a road construction project between Gander and Glenwood had been started but never finished. This did however provide accessible land of good quality for residential construction, with lots of 1.6 acres, much larger than the usual size in a town.

Mr Baird and his family moved in to their house in Beaverwood in June 1951. Some of the others who built homes there in that period were Charles Taylor, Howard Barnes, another Baird (cousin Elmo), Ernest Peyton, Lester Collins, Scotty Tulk, Bob Walsh and of course Cy Rowsell.

As an anecdote, according to Alice Taylor in Faye's pages, on snowy stormy days, the kids from Beaverwood were among the few who made it to Gander Academy, quite some distance away in the new town. They made it because of Mr. Baird and his snowmobile. He would go around from house to house picking up the six or seven kids of school age living at that time in Beaverwood. It would have looked something like the one below.



It was a large, enclosed seven-passenger vehicle with seats across the front and bench-like seats along the side. The kids loved it – even if it took them to school!

By 1955, there were in Beaverwood 50 houses already erected or under construction, mostly by the owners themselves.

In the meantime, the basic structure of the new town was being put in place. A major problem of old Gander was not that it was “company town” – it was more of a “companies” town. Everybody lived in an

apartment belonging to some organisation or other. If, for example, an airline company pulled out, the people living in the airline's apartment building could quickly find themselves looking for a place to live. There was, except in a few outlying spot such as Union East, no private home ownership.

Faced with a requirement to get people off the old airport, help was needed get people into new homes, an equivalent of VLA assistance for non-veterans. Accordingly, as explained in the town plan of 1957, the Department of Transport and the Newfoundland Government approached Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation to see whether help would be available under the National Housing Act. The answer was affirmative and in August 1951, a Committee (the "Policy Committee") was set up to act as a temporary Town Council during the early days of development.

Such was the urgency of the situation however, that even before August, a preliminary ground survey had been carried out by the Department of Transport. By April, 1951, a sketch layout and report had been prepared by Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

In October 1951, the Department of Transport agreed to undertake preliminary engineering works. CMHC also agreed to prepare a full town-scheme. Meetings of the Policy Committee in February 1952 and later helped clarify the plan of which the following were several important points:

- DOT would survey and lay out the site, and provide roads, water and power
- rents for government-built houses would be related to tenants' income, and be comparable to mortgage and other charges incurred by homeowners
- home owners would be able to sell their houses to CMHC if they left Gander
- residential lots would be sold at \$50 plus services
- DOT would temporarily provide municipal services

The table below gives the situation in the mid-50s.

	Veterans		Rental Units DOT CMHC		NHA & Privately Financed	
	Starts	Completions	Starts	Completions	Starts	Completions
1950	1	1	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
1951	6	6	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
1952	12	12	50	2	NIL	NIL
1953	12	12	50	70	4	NIL
1954	4	4	30	28	64	20
1955	7	7	81	30	87	48
1956	9	9	35	96	169	160
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>228</b>

Mr. Tom Cleary at 131 Elizabeth Drive, followed closely by Mr. Clarence Woolfrey, were the first residents of the new town in 1952. Presumably they are the two “rental units DOT CHMC” mentioned in the table for 1952.

A major element in residential construction was the “Co-op building system”, combined with a low down payment, guaranteed CHMC mortgage. The men chose the co-op they wished to belong to and would do this based on the various skills of the workers. They would try to round up the required expertise within each group. Only if absolutely necessary, the group would hire, for example, a contractor to do the plumbing, electrical wiring, brickwork or a master carpenter to supervise their work.

The houses were all based on CHMC approved plans. These future homeowners would receive a book of general plans and sketches from which they would make their choice, based on the number of occupants, budget, etc. A 2-story house would have cost about \$1000 more than a bungalow.

A typical CHMC book of plans would be something like the one found here: (this link does not always work – you may have to copy and paste in your browser.)

<http://www.midcenturyhomestyle.com/plans/national-plan/1952/52nps-butte.htm>

The homeowner would then receive full blueprints, so that all work would be up to specifications and pass CMHC inspection. The agreement was generally that no one could move in until all the houses were habitable. The priority was always to get the foundations and basic sheeting done, so that work could continue inside, even in the worst of weather. Lights were set up during the evening hours, and the men would work even in freezing temperatures to get their homes completed. These men had jobs mostly with the airlines and could work on the homes only during time off.

Several of these groups were:

° Calvin Pelley, Bill Maloney, Fred Dawson, Ray Carter, Howard Cranford, Andy Dyke, Des Griffin, Cal Osbourne, Steve Walsh, Harry Hayward and Harry Rideout (with a hired foreman Dawe(?) Rideout). This was a Hawker Crescent group.

° Charlie Mullins, Gus Bailey, Walt Mesh jr, Morley Brinson, Lud Hoddnott, Clarence Lannon and (?) Pinsent

° Ed McCarthy, Gerry Wakeham, Eric Smith, Abner Knee, Johnny O'Reilly, Gerry Smith, Vince Myrick, Jim Strong, Bill Price and his brother Carl Price. Mr Knee was known as the furnace specialist in this one.

From cutting the trees and digging out the basement to a first family supper in the new kitchen, it could take the best part of a year and a half.

But the guys who built these homes were tough, proud folk, with true community spirit. As Gander's environment changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this teamwork and community will be needed again – and will have a good model to inspire it.

-----  
**The main sources for this article were :**

- ° Documents on relations between Canada and Newfoundland, vol1. 1935-49, compiled by Paul Bridle
- ° RCAF Daily Diary, Gander, WW2
- ° Faye's Pages, by Faye (Lewis) Raynard (done after the Gander schools reunion of 2010)
- ° Faye's determined work to obtain info on Kenney Construction
- ° Audrey (Mingo) Grantham's info on Easter Woodworkers
- ° The personal history of a number of pioneers in Gander
- ° Photos from the late Fred Smeaton
- ° Numerous individuals such as Cliff Powell, Darrell Hillier, Rick Stead, my late father, Calvin J Pelley