

Gander's runway extensions

(bobsganderhistory, by Robert G Pelley, 11 May 2024)

The end of 1939 saw the final construction and paving of Gander's first four runways. The airport was officially considered completed as of Oct. 3, 1939. These runways were brought into being via a well-sequenced plan. The basic operation was:

- ° deliver crushed stone from Hall's Quarry by train
- ° any other required on-site crushing or washing
- ° asphalt delivered in railway tank cars from the COLAS plant in Clarenville,
- ° transfer this liquid asphalt by truck to on-site mixers
- ° bring this asphalt mix to the spreaders.

These runways did well their job up until the end of the war as a point for massive RAF and USAAF ferry and return operations to and from Europe.

However, the end of the war and the start of civil operations brought new requirements that at first officials refused to recognize. The St. John's Evening Telegram gave the following editorial opinion on 30 May 1950; (zoom as required)

GANDER RUNWAYS

If care is not exercised Canada may miss the plane at Gander airport.

The Department of Transport is building the airport up to be the big brass knob on the front door of Canada, but it would appear that not enough thought is being given to the future so far as the big airport is concerned.

Right now everything seems to be running smoothly, as far as use of the airport is concerned, but the day is not far off when the big trans-Atlantic airlines will be forced to move to Goose Bay or Moncton as their half-way house in trans-ocean flights.

The reason is runways. Gander's biggest to-day is 6,000 feet long, but with the rapid advance in plane growth this runway will soon be too short.

The new Boeing Stratocruiser, for example, needs a minimum length of runway of 7,500 feet, preferably 8,000 and this just isn't available at Gander. Unless runways are lengthened and strengthened, airlines using these bigger planes may be forced to abandon Gander for other ports. This they would be loth to do but they may have no alternative.

That's the picture commercially, but on defence, too, Gander may soon be useless. To-day's bombers are getting bigger and bigger, and are being powered by jet engines. They also need a longer runway than Gander can presently provide.

It is time the authorities concerned took some action. Next year it may be too late.

The Telegram went on to say on 16 September 1950 that the question was now settled and the decision had been made by Ottawa to lengthen the runway. They were not shy in taking the credit for getting the ball rolling!

Department of Transport to Lengthen Runway at Gander

OTTAWA, Sept. 12 (CP)—Plans are underway to lengthen one runway at Gander Airport to 8,600 feet with a bearing capacity of 150,000 pounds, Transport Minister Chevrier disclosed in the Commons to-day.

In a repl. tabled for Gordon Higgins (PC-St. John's East), the Minister said it was expected the work will get underway as soon as weather permits next spring.

The length of the runways at Gander have been a controversy ever since the subject was first brought up in the editorial columns of the St. John's Evening Telegram.

The Telegram claimed that the runways were too short for the most modern planes, and that some of the airlines operating through the inland airport had to be diverted to the airport at Goose Bay, Labrador, because the Gander runways couldn't take them.

Fears have also been expressed that the runways at Gander were not big enough to handle long range bombers of the Allied air forces.



What the newspaper report did not reveal is that the question had already been brought up by Pan American Airways in talks with officials in Ottawa. A memo from operations staff to Juan Trippe, the president of Pan Am, dated 23 May 1949, explains the first salvo:

MEMORANDUM TO MR. TRIPPE:

In response to our request that AOA support our desire to have the runway at Gander extended, Mr. Eaton yesterday discussed the subject over the telephone with Mr. A. T. Couloy, in Ottawa. Mr. Eaton advises that his conclusion from the conversation was very definitely that they were not interested in doing anything at all. Mr. Eaton brought up the point that if Gander were to be continued as the principal operating base it would, of course, have to be developed to the point of servicing any and all types of aircraft. He said that he felt this point registered with Mr. Couloy but that it in no way moved him.

A high-level internal Pan Am discussion explains what was hoped for in April 1949: A letter to Pan Am VP Ingalls in May of 1949 summarised well the situation:

- ° Present runways permit Stratocruiser take-offs with 61 passengers and normal cargo only 65% of the time
- ° Goose Bay will have to be used on eastbound flights when winds in Gander prevent takeoff with full weight (Goose can be used with full weight under any wind conditions.)
- ° Agreements with Canadian and Nfld governments permit the use of Goose only if Gander is "not operational". If this includes wind conditions, there is no problem. An interpretation is being sought.
- ° Movement of Pan Am B-77 Stratocruiser operations to Goose is not desired because Gander has better services. DC-4s and Constellations already use it.
- ° The best alternative would be the extension of a runway to 9500 ft, especially if a "high-density" Stratocruiser is used (98-100 passengers). A minimum for the actual 61 passenger planes would be 7500 ft.
- ° An extension to the basically east-west runway 14-32 is recommended.

There was a fair amount of discussion over next months, but on 14 April 1950, the Pan Am manager in Gander, Frank M Slyvester, sent a note to VP Strieffler, mentioning that the Canadian Parliament had reduced the 1950-51 DOT budget from 75m\$ to 50m\$. The Gander operating budget was reduced by

500,000\$. The best that could be hoped for was drainage on runway on 07-29 to reduce problems of spring thaw and to give it better lighting.

ENGINEERING ANALYZING LATEST PROPELLER INFORMATION TO
DETERMINE NECESSARY RUNWAY LENGTH PRELIMINARY ESTIMATE
PROBABLY NEED ADDITIONAL FIVE HUNDRED FEET EACH END OF
RUNWAY 14/32 GANDER. OFFICER IN CHARGE IS A D MCLEAN COMMA
COMPTROLLR OF CIVIL AVIATION COMMA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT
OTTAWA=
INGALLS PANAMERICAN AIRWAYS NEW YORK NY=

At one point Pan Am suggested in collaboration with the other airlines to advance the money required to pay for the extension, with corresponding reductions in future landing fees. Alas, Canada being a parliamentary democracy, an action of this nature would in fact amount to trying to get around budgets and laws voted by the legislature.

Another problem related to the runway extension was the cost of hauling gravel, as Halls Quarry and related transport facilities no longer existed. It was expected that this would be alleviated in 1951 by the planned construction of a new road, connecting Gander further east and west.

It seems that many groups tried to have a say in runway extensions. It was the IATA this time which gave the following information on 14 February 1951:

The following letter has just been received from Mr. A.T. Cowley,
Director of Air Services of the Canadian Department of Transport. I believe that
self-explanatory.

*You will know that our Department had planned to extend
runway 09-27 at Gander to a length of 8600 feet. Moving the
railroad is necessary to such a project and it is now estimated
that the costs of this item will be far in excess of the funds
appropriated by the Canadian Government. There is a real possi-
bility, therefore, that the project may be deferred.

If moving the railroad does prove to be beyond our
immediate resources we plan to extend runway 14-32 in lieu.
It would also be our intention to continue the IIS install-
ation on runway 09-27 at its present length in order to achieve
the highest utilization and the best coverage.

Once again, the Telegram was a bit trigger-happy. On 23 January 1951, the Telegram announced to the world that the basically north-south runway 07-29 would be extended to the north, requiring displacing the railway tracks correspondingly to the north. It would appear that ideas such as digging down and lowering the rail-bed and constructing the runway over it were not considered.

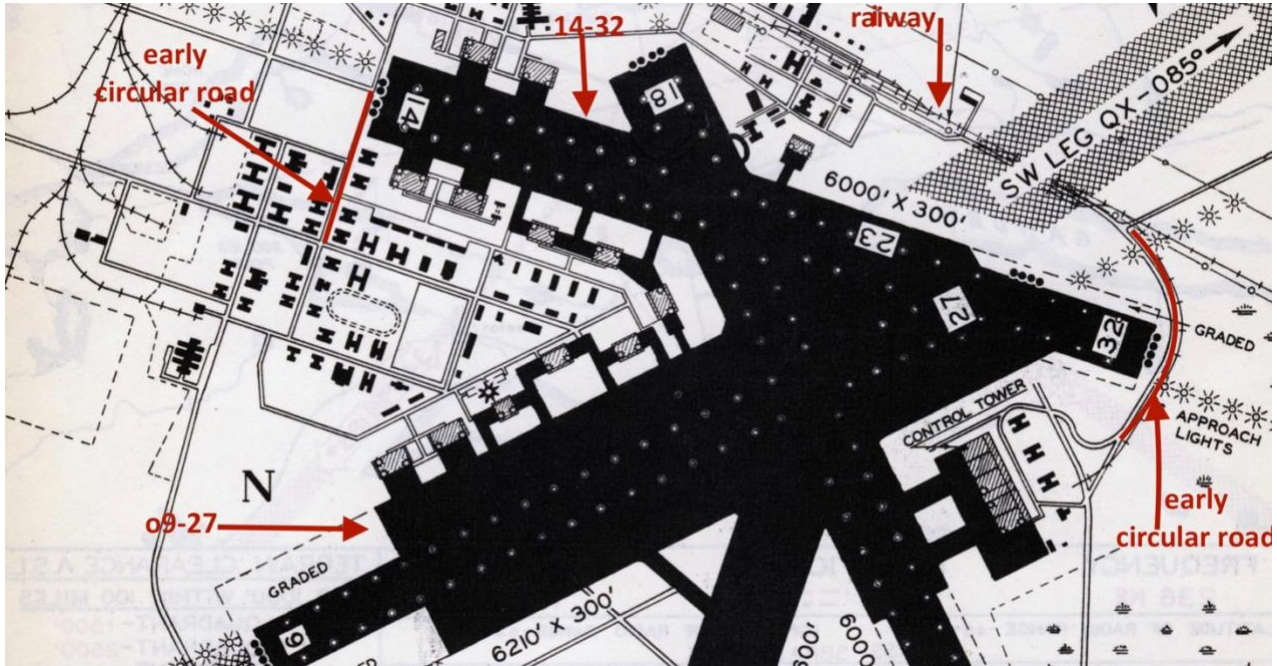
It is hard though to blame the Telegram. The Western Star six days later published an article where Gander's airport manager, H.A.L. Pattison, explained exactly the same plan of extending runway 07-29.



The 07-29 solution did not happen. The cost of moving the railway line made it impossible. Finally, it was runway 14-32 that was extended to Pan Am's satisfaction. Survey crews and ground testing crews were reported to be in operation just before the end of April 1951. This extension as far as can be ascertained was carried out by the North Shore Construction Company, bringing runway 14-32 to 8900 feet.

While this solution meant that the railway line did not require any changes. It did mean changes to the "circular road" going around the perimeter of the airport. The following sketch map shows the railway line,

the two runways mentioned above and the old circular road around the ends of the runways, each with lights to warn of low-flying aircraft.



The extension of 12-34 (later corrected to 13-31) changed the circular road as shown below:



To accommodate bigger aircraft, Gander built an even bigger runway. On the above map, one can see a runway heading pretty well due south. The biggest change is to the very short runway known

as 05-23 . Known now as 03-21, it was extended, with a very slight change of angle, from 4575 ft to 10200. Probably due to experience In Gander and having men and equipment in situ, North Shore Construction continued on to do this latest extension.

It was from this runway, that took off a McDonnell Douglas DC-8, Arrow Air Flight 1285, 12 December 1985, carrying men mostly from the 101st Airborne Division's 3rd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment. The plane crashed shortly after leaving the ground. All 248 soldiers and the plane's eight crew members were killed.

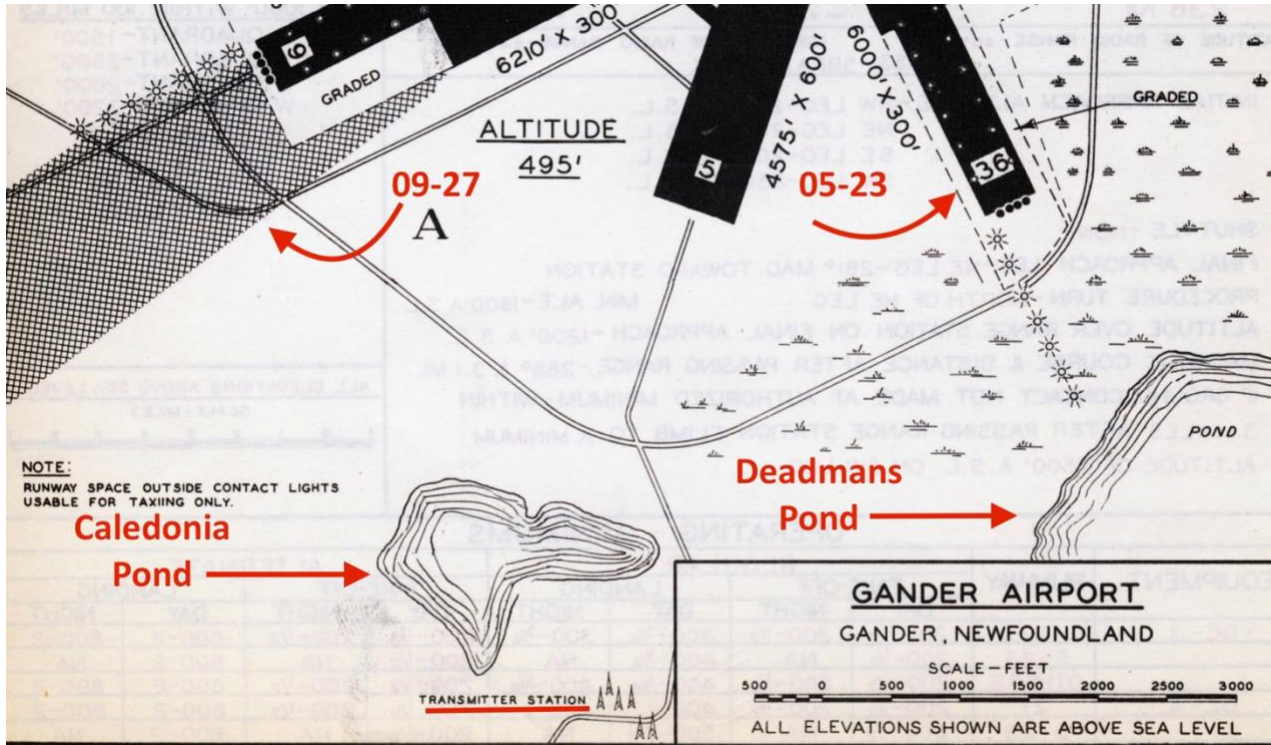
This runway extension had unexpected consequences. Firstly, it ran out over the original transmission site with its very high radio towers.



Because it was not worth the time and money to collect up and/or sell the more or less antique 6'ft radio equipment, it and spare parts were left in place. It happened that in Gander, the young fellows were getting interested in ham radio, amplifiers, old radios and the like. Many "raiding parties" came back with cardboard boxes of tubes and small parts for all manner of projects. This extension surely motivated a generation of young scientists!

Another facet of this runway extension had to do with the topology of the land.

Just next to the transmission tower was a small pond, known in the early years as "Transmitters pond". After the war, the British Overseas Airline Corporation took over the old artillery site just north of the pond. They called it Caledonia Pond, that somehow never got fished out.



The runway extension wiped it out, as can be seen in the article below. It is from the "Observer's Weekly" of 03 December 1953. (Zoom as necessary)

<h2>Fill In Pond To Extend Runway</h2> <p>In order to extend the new runway now under construction by the North Shore Construction Co. it has been found necessary to remove Caledonia Pond. To this effect a large river was constructed and the level of the Pond has already gone down some four feet.</p> <p>Word of the removal of Caledonia Pond reached members of the Gander Rod and Gun Club who were most eager to remove all the large trout from the waters and transport them to Deadman's Pond. Last week Mr. Roy Saunders and Mr. Cal Osmond</p>	<p>of the Executive of the Club looked over the Pond and found that the waters had been lowered too much to effect any salvage of the large mud trout that abound in this well known pond; it may be that numbers of these fish have escaped down the river to Deadman's Pond a distance of half a mile but it seems more likely that the main body will perish in the mud and silt.</p> <p>Caledonia Pond is known to produce Mud Trout to a size of from three to four pounds; a two and one half pounder is most common. It was the plan of the</p>	<p>Gander Rod and Club to enlist the help of the Boy Scouts to drive all the fish to the outlet and net them as they go down river; then placing the trout in barrels of water and convey them to Deadman's Pond.</p> <p>It seems a pity that the Engineering department of the Construction Company did not consult any Government or local Game keepers before starting the draining of this pond as the full co-operation of all members of the Gander Rod and Gun Club at least could have effected a good percentage of capture of these doomed fish.</p>
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Sadly, commercial aviation activity soon took the same route as fish in Caledonia Pond. The aircraft that these extended runways were planned to accommodate were soon able to overfly Gander and hardly use this new asphalt at all.

Apparently, they call this progress.

Special Credits:

- ° Darrell Hillier who did the research in the Rooms in St.John's to furnish the newspaper clippings
- ° University of Miami for the files on Pan Am
- ° The late Fred Smeation for certain photos

