

Schools in Old Gander

(Robert G Pelley 2022-09-18)
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Introduction

The growth of schools in Gander is in many ways a direct parallel with the development of Gander as a wartime base, a commercial aviation hub and a regional center. The number of children enrolled in school was directly related to the state of development of the airport and new town.

For example, during the pre-war construction period, Gander was rather rough-and-tumble, based on a large number of construction workers whose families remained in the outports or other towns they came from. During the wartime period, there was little place for families, and the few that were there could count only on the most rudimentary of teaching facilities.

After the war, when the military left, the population fell to about 800 souls, with few children. The abundance of abandoned military barracks meant that for a short while, there was ample space for new classrooms. However, this was to change rapidly after the influx of employees as Gander became the centre of air travel over the North Atlantic. There was a demand not only for more education but for better education as well.

In Old Gander, there were two parallel school systems that got along, but were nonetheless careful to maintain their distances. The Roman Catholics had their schools while the Amalgamated School took care of the Protestants. It would be rare in those days to see a Protestant school kid at a school dance in an RC school and vice versa. It is to be noted however that despite this official differentiation, in everyday life, for example, town-sponsored hockey, afternoon skating, non-denominational social activities and general everyday life, there was no segregation. It is true though that in the years after graduation, inter-religion marriages were quite infrequent.

This distinction between the two systems did however cause research problems. The Amalgamated School seems to have been much more oriented toward a permanent record of activities. Annual "school books" were published by the Protestant system, while this was not the case at St. Joseph's. The Protestants seemed like annual reports and articles in the local paper.

However, contacts with the RC church in Gander, the RC diocese in Grand Falls and Gander Collegiate yielded no information on their buildings, staff or students of Old Gander. As a result, this article may unintentionally seem lopsided.

First attempts

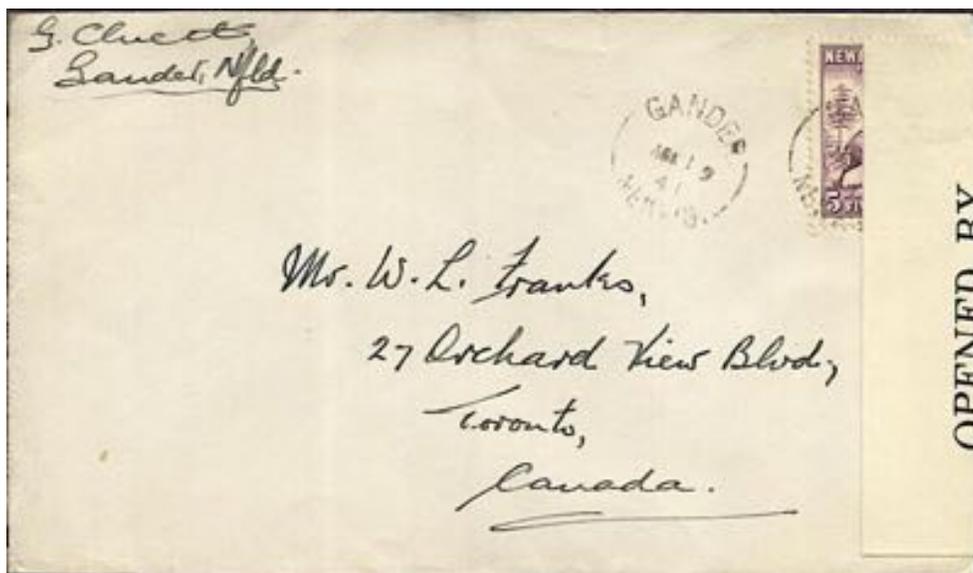
In early 1940, the first school in Old Gander was not a building but rather a boxcar serving five students. A Walter Chaulk from Corner Brook was the first teacher. He was set up at Cobbs Pond, some miles west of Gander airport . Mr Chaulk would take a speeder to Gander and teach for a period of one week, two weeks or two months, according to different sources, after which he would head to another town, apparently Glenwood, but could be some other. When school was not in session, arrangements were made for teaching by correspondence.

Shortly after, a small school was set up in a tar-paper shack near the railway station. Mr Chaulk taught in it for a very short time but he was replaced by Jenny Noftal (who shortly after married Hugh Lacey). There may have been a temporary class in the Administration Building. The school then moved to the basement of Jack Sheppard.

During this time there were only five students of different ages in Gander.

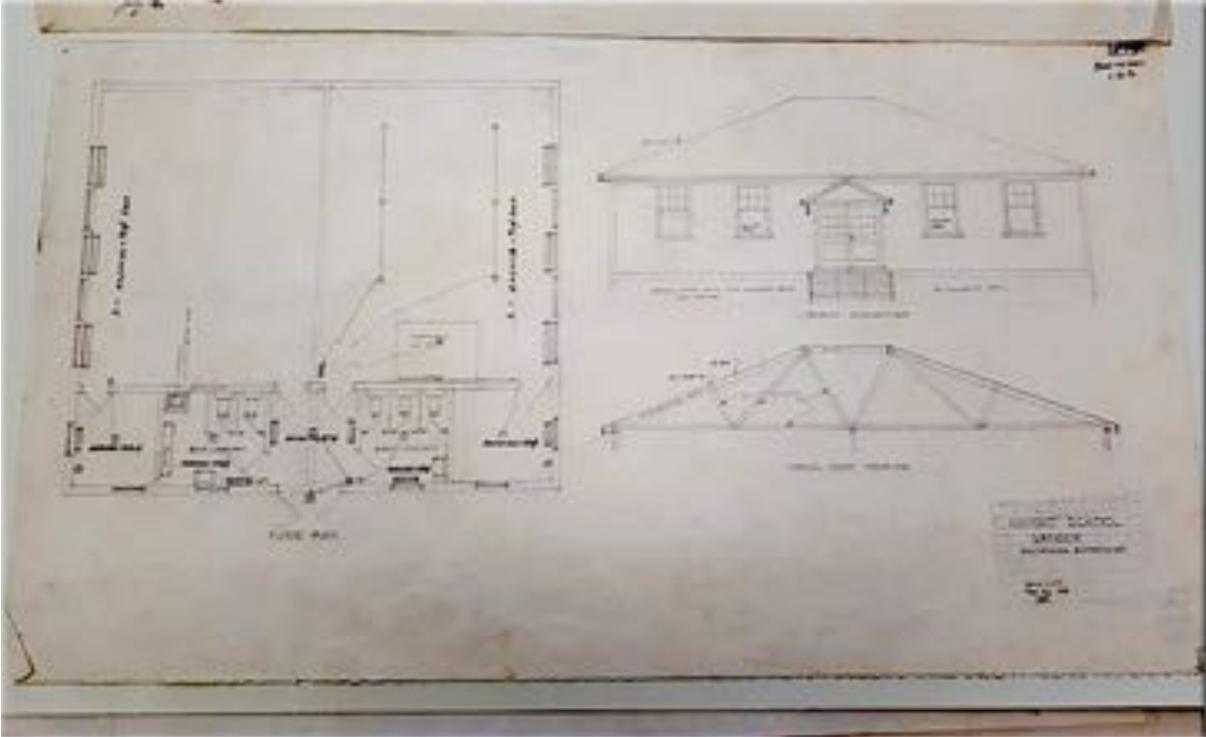
First permanent school was built on Chestnut Road, the street with the row of houses that were built in late 1938 to accommodate the families of the men who occupied official functions, such as the airport manager or the manager of Shell Oil.

The first teacher was Gordon Cluett. The following photo shows an envelope from 1941 giving his name as the return address. In Old Gander at that time, there was no need to give a street name and number! However, being wartime, his letter was censored.



Mr Cluett taught a first group of 12-14 students up to grades 9 until another space was found. Bill Chafe had to go to Harbour Grace to finish his high school. By 1947 the schools had moved to other locations and this "Community School" was closed down. However, school space again

became crowded due to the growth of Gander's population and was re-opened in 1949 as kindergarten only. It was divided into a classroom and a playroom. But again, more space was needed, so in 1953, the school was redivided as two classes of grade one.



Gordon Cluett was followed a short later by a Mr Hutchings and later by Arthur Baker. The Spring 1945 edition of the RCAF station magazine gave the following description: (zoom as necessary)

<h2 style="text-align: center;">Gander Schoolhouse</h2> <p>There is a building at the northern end of Chestnut Street which, although new is often passed by almost unnoticed. A small brown building, set back a bit from the street, its predominant feature is the abundance of large windows.</p> <p>It is, however, for five days a week one of the most important little buildings in Gander.</p> <p>From early Monday morning until late Friday afternoon this spot rings with the voices of Gander's 56 civilian children.</p> <p>Back in 1941 there were about 12 civilian children of school age living with their parents here at Gander. As there was no regular means of giving these children a proper education at that time it was decided to invite an inspector of schools up from St. John's to attempt the founding of a school.</p> <p>Although all of the present 56 pupils speak English fluently there were some of the four nationalities represented who could not, on their arrival in Gander, speak anything but their native tongue.</p> <p>The ages range from five to sixteen and they are taught from the Kindergarten stage to the ninth grade by Mr. Arthur Baker who is a native of Hodges Cove near Trinity Bay, Nfld.</p> <p>Education is still built around the three R's, and the children wrinkle their brows over the usual printers,</p>	<p>spellers and multiplication tables. Geography is undoubtedly a difficult subject to keep up with, but tales of Christopher Columbus and King Henry VIII have lost none of their fascination and certainly a good chunk of Newfoundland's own history is being enacted under their very noses.</p> <p>The same old schoolboy pranks are pulled off with the same old regularity, and Mr. Baker has his quota of stay-ins after school. It's a poor place to play hockey from though—the children are transported in large buses and a truant scholar would find it pretty difficult to sneak down some back alley for a bootleg game of Cops and Robbers.</p> <p>The children, who show a real interest in the school work are also quite keen on other activities such as their rather impressive collection of War Bonds and Stamps and the Junior Red Cross.</p> <p>Like all normal children, however, the keenest interest is displayed in the recess periods during class hours.</p> <p>During these break-offs in fine weather the shrill young voices at their games about the school yard form a pleasant contrast to the usual humdrum noises of a large air station.</p>
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This article had these two hard-to-reproduce photos:



Amalgamated School expansion into other buildings

Maps and official sketches of Gander show the existence of another wartime school other than the one on Chestnut. This was in building 80 on the American Side. No record was found of American families in Gander during the war, so it would appear that it was most likely used as a training room of some sort by American service personnel. In the 1950s it became accommodations for Imperial Oil.

By September 1945, there were 55 students registered, but a year later, enrolment rose to 88. More space was needed. As of the 1946-47 school year, the immediate, short-term solution was building 52, known as "Duffy's Tavern", just east of the Globe Theatre. During the war it had been used as a men's canteen. This is how it was described by the RCAF at the time:

IT'S a humble little place and it doesn't get much publicity squatting there just across the road from the theatre. Its structure is of the simplest design, being merely four walls, a roof and inside a little recess that serves as a bar.

It is not really known where that name came from. According to oral tradition, it may have had something to do with a radio program of the same name. It may have been the name of a "manager".

Duffy's Tavern was closed at the end of the school year 1946-47. But it reopened in 1953 for grades four and five and later two classes of grade three until the new school was available.



Duffy's Tavern

During the period up to the construction of a new school building in the new town, the government would pay half the cost of a new school but would not pay for renovations to or maintenance of existing schools. The school board was therefore constantly looking for financing, from everything from bean suppers, cake sales, bingos, concerts and the like to raise money. In 1946 each family with children in school was assessed \$1,50 per month as a form of "school tax".

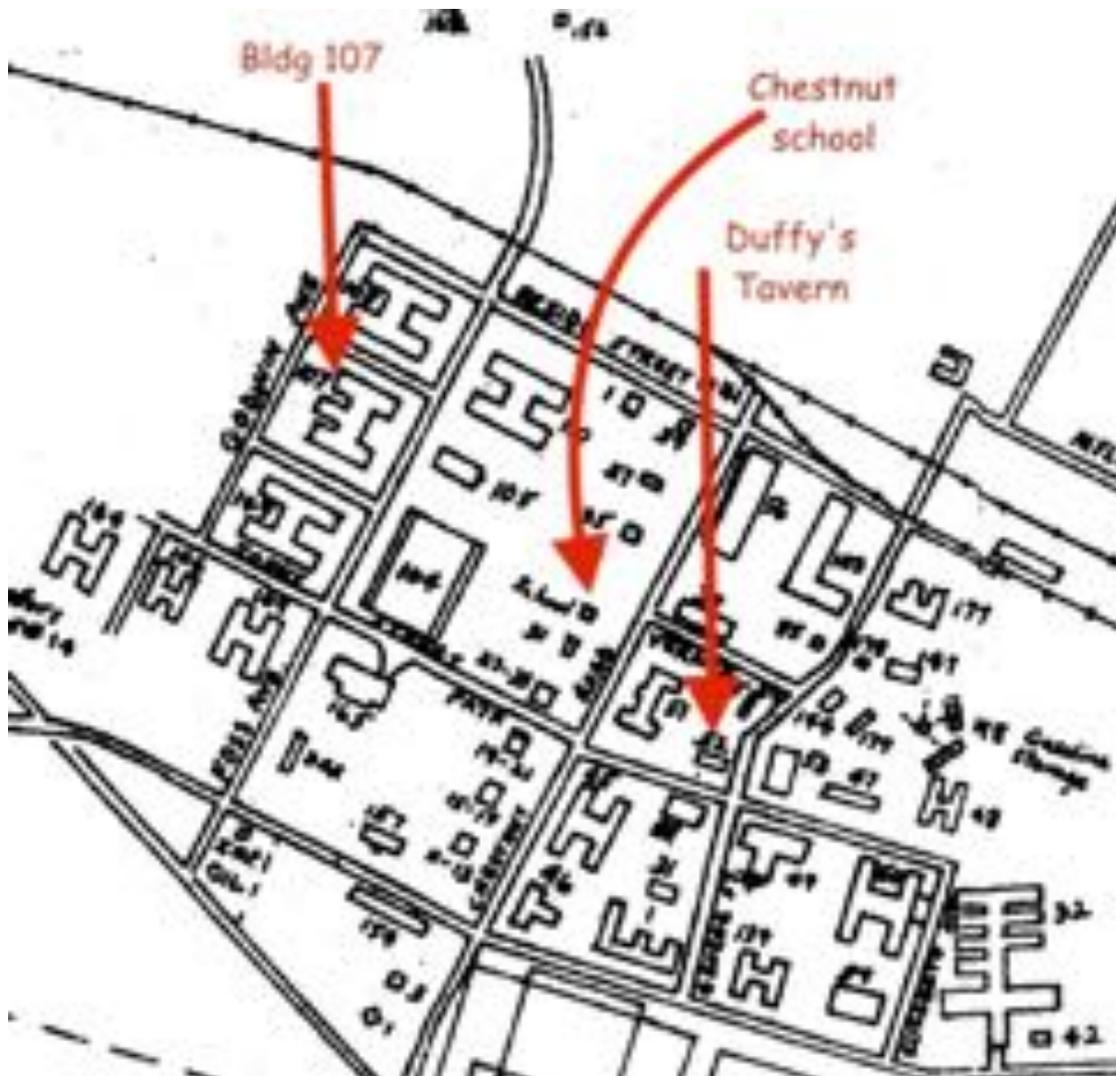
In 1946, the school board did manage to get a grant of \$10000 from the Department of Education. The school funding was also aided by the local offices of airlines and other companies.

During this period, Gander's schools were a brief subject of discussion in a "Meeting of the Delegation of Newfoundland to the Negotiation of the Terms of Union" on 09 September 1948. A brief was submitted by the Director of Civil Aviation, indicating the need of acquisition of land within the airport area notably for schools. A search in later documents shows no further reference to the acquisition of land for new construction. In all likelihood, it was considered cheaper to renovate existing buildings than to build new ones.

In the meantime, planning for probable increased enrolment was going on in Gander. In 1947, a "building committee" had been formed to look into the renovation of another site, namely building 107 on Foss Avenue, a short distance to the east of the school on Chestnut. Being a former airmen's mess, this was a one-story H-building a bit wider than most models, quite suitable for classrooms and an auditorium. This became known as the "main building" and the one that comes to mind when referring to the old Amalgamated School (or Hunt Memorial Academy after a principal who drowned on 23 April 1951). The phone number was 389.



Building 107
Main building
Amalgamated School, later Hunt Memorial Academy



The occupation of building 107 was still quite insufficient. A large number of other sites were used all over Gander including notably:

- building 105 across the road from the “main building”
- building 108 next to the main building
- drill hall on Foss Avenue roughly across the street from the main building
- the Eastbound Inn near the railway station
- the American side Fire Hall
- the Airlines hotel
- buildings 3 and 5 on the American side and various others.

This is how school activities were described by Eileen Chafe, a student of the Amalgamated School, in the local newspaper, “The Gander Traveller” early November 1950:

Amalgamated

By EILEEN CHAFE

The canteen operated by the Students' Representative Government has now re-opened for the year. Cokes, bars and cracker-jacks are eagerly bought by pupils during recess and the profits are being used for sports equipment and other extras needed in the school.

On Friday afternoon, Oct. 27th, the senior girls of the school held an afternoon tea in the Assembly Hall. Parents and friends as well as pupils and teachers attended and were served an enjoyable lunch by the girls. The proceeds of the tea which amounted to about \$35 will be used to buy new hockey uniforms for the school team. A design for the uniform has been decided upon and we hope to receive them in time for the opening of the hockey season.

The annual meeting of the Amalgamated School Board was held in the school on Friday, Oct. 27th. Reports were read by the president and secretary-treasurer of the School Board as well as by the principal. It was learned from the principal's report that the present enrollment of 419 pupils will likely reach 500 by next year and the Board will again

be faced with accommodation difficulties in addition to many other problems experienced in schools of this size.

On Tuesday, Oct. 31st, the school was gaily decorated in the traditional Hallowe'en colors of black and orange. In every classroom afternoon parties were held and many pupils manquéraded in various costumes. Games were played and prizes were awarded for winners as well as for best costumes. Lunch was served, and a good time was had by all. In the evening the High School grades held a party in the Assembly Hall. Games were played, but dancing highlighted the activities. Prizes were awarded for novelty dances and also for games. Sandwiches, cookies and soft drinks were served at eleven, and the party concluded with a tag dance.

The following are photos of different various buildings used in Old Gander by the Amalgamated Schools:

◦ Immediately north of the main building: build 108

This building was occupied by Department of Transport personnel. Four of 18 apartments closest to the main building were converted into classrooms. In the mid-50s, before the new school opened, there were two kindergarten classes, a mixed class of students from Union East and a mixed class of grades three and four.



◦ Across the road from the main building: building 105

During the war this was the HQ of the RCAF “Women’s Division” and later become apartments for DOT. It was taken over as a school house in September 1956 and housed two Grade 5 classes.



° Buildings 3 and 5 on the American side:

These two buildings were practically identical and close together. Building 3 was opened as a school in 1954, with grades kindergarten, 1 and 2. The other half of the building was used by Gander's dentist. Building 5 had been used by Bell Telephone and in 1955 was renovated to be used both as a Grade 3 classroom of Hunt Memorial Academy and another class of St. Joseph's school.

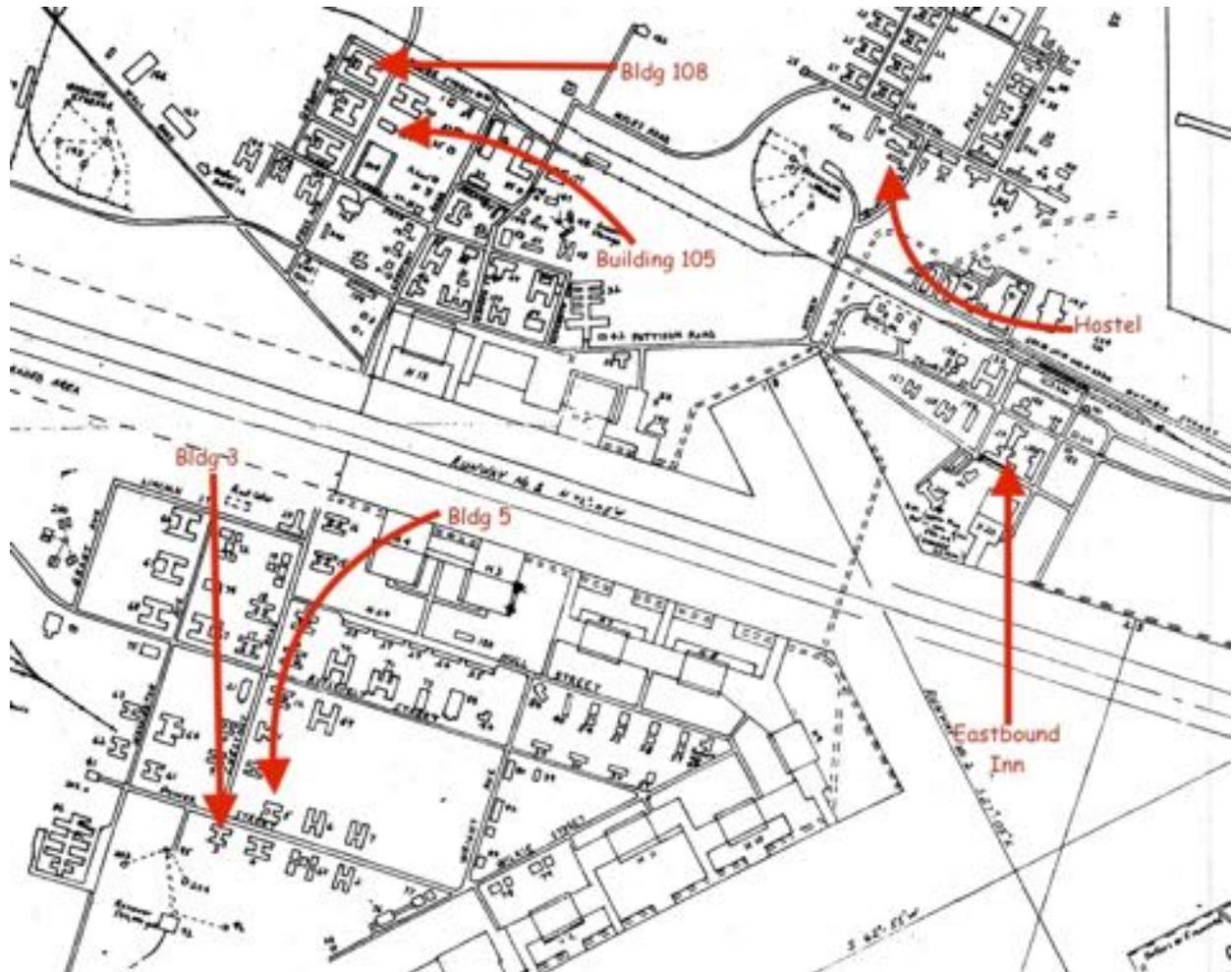


° Eastbound Inn

Another building used as a school was closer to the railway station, the Administration Building and the round-top Hangar 20. This building built was during the war to accommodate ferry crews working for the RAF Ferry Command. After the war the government of Newfoundland used it primarily as sleeping quarters and dining hall. The Royal Bank's wartime branch remained there and after the war, some tended to call it the "Bank Building". In 1956 the Bank moved into the new town and its vacated space was used for Grade 4 students.



There was also a teachers' hostel in building 48 on the Army Side.
(Phone number 2246)



Amalgamated School in the new town of Gander

At the end of the school year 1956-57, Hunt Memorial Academy had slightly over 1000 students and 27 teachers, in eight former military-occupied buildings scattered all over Old Gander.

The facilities were minimal, basically square rooms, with wooden combined chair-tables. There might be a globe, a few wall maps and sometimes a record player or tape recorder. The new school was designed to be more modern, for example, with a proper gymnasium, a science lab and a room for what was called "domestic science".

Gander Academy was lucky to have had, since the earliest moments, an excellent collaboration of many groups, companies and interested civic-minded individuals. The RCAF and the RCN were quick to collaborate with both the School Board and the Home and School Association. There was always a representative of one of the airlines operating through Gander. Each religion had a representative. Being the 1950's, it was, with rare exceptions, an all-male leadership.

The following shows the list of community leaders and teachers as of September 1957:

SCHOOL BOARD	
Mr. R. Tilley (Chairman)	
Mr. J. James (Vice-Chairman)	
Mr. G. T. LeGrow (Secretary-Treasurer)	
Rev. E. C. Sturge (ex-officio)	
Rev. J. H. Moss (ex-officio)	
Mr. C. Aldrich	W/O T. A. Prest
Mr. D. Simmons	Mr. E. Baird
Mr. A. Kree	Mr. G. Smith
Mr. E. Baker	Mr. G. Warr
Mr. J. Scivour	
HOME AND SCHOOL ASSOCIATION	
Lieut. E. M. L. Kennedy, R.C.N. (President)	
Mrs. G. Paton (Vice-President)	
Mr. H. Gosse (Secretary)	
Mr. J. Dean (Treasurer)	
TEACHING STAFF	
Mr. R. Clarke (Principal)	
Mr. H. B. Loder, B.A. (Vice-Principal)	
Mr. G. Wells, B.A.	Mrs. R. Spurnell
Mr. A. Case	Mrs. S. Jones
Mr. L. Thoms	Mrs. S. Bailey
Mr. C. Dewling	Miss F. EVELAIGH
Miss T. Hameon	Mrs. F. Gosse
Mrs. G. Loveday	Miss V. Greening
Miss F. Snow	Miss F. Loder
Mrs. V. Jones	Mrs. M. Saunders
Mrs. I. Winter	Miss B. Abbott
Mrs. R. Clarke	Mrs. D. Rose
Miss K. Gill	Miss J. Torrville
Mrs. E. Jones	Mrs. L. Pynn
Mrs. F. Davies	Mrs. S. Lane
Mrs. M. Anenson (Music)	

This photo, taken roughly from the north-west, shows Gander Academy in the early fall of 1957, not long after its construction.



GANDER AMALGAMATED SCHOOL

Gander Amalgamated School contains 30 classrooms, and has 1,100 pupils registered from kindergarten to Grade Eleven.

However, there was much more to a school than a building and students. It also needs teachers and that, in Gander, was a problem, as there was no place to house them. A first solution to provide hostels here and there on the old airport site, hardly convenient, and in the long term impossible, as the old buildings were being torn down. One building in Old Gander - a former customs apartment building - was simply sawn into four sections, hauled into the new town, put back together and spruced up and repurposed as a hostel.

The school board also purchased land, built homes and when up to specifications, sold them to teachers at cost price.

Those very early years of Gander Academy were also marked by controversy. The school board had decided not to renew the principal, Roland Clarke, and the vice-principal, Harold Loder. There was apparently a desire by some board members to modernise teaching methods and style in the same manner that the facilities had been "upgraded". One objective was apparently to increase the number of teachers with general teaching or specialised subject university graduates.

In any case, a new principal from the United Kingdom was hired in September of 1958. However he did not last long enough to have his name listed in the school yearbook. His methods and style had earned the favour of half the school board, those who wanted change, but not so by those who thought the school had always kept very high standards over the years. By early November, he found a way of “being urgently required to return to England”. A number of teachers left or were requested to leave at the same time. Gilbert Wells, the vice-principal, became acting principal with Clyde Taite, a grade eleven teacher, as vice-principal.

All this now meant a shortage of full-time teachers, so the school board sent out a call for volunteers to parents with any kind of teaching experience. This had mixed results, since in some cases, enthusiasm was insufficient to make up for lack of subject knowledge and teaching experience.

It would be safe to say that during those early years, the steadfastness of one man in particular was crucial. Gil Wells was for many years the vice-principal, acting principal or official principal. On many occasions he was the only one who managed to keep the school on an even keel.

In 1959 school started three weeks late due to a polio scare in Newfoundland.. In the same year was the first student council, with George Baker (later member of parliament and Senator) as president. By 1960 there were 1135 student and 38 teachers.

Roman Catholic School System – early schools

As mentioned in the introduction, there is a paucity of information on the Roman Catholic schools in old Gander. Only two buildings were identified in Old Gander. One of them has already been mentioned, namely Building 5 on the American, where the two school systems each had a classroom.

The other Roman Catholic School was also on the American side. It is interesting to note that it was remarkably similar to that of the Amalgamated school on the RCAF/Canadian side. This was not a coincidence.

The reason goes back to the nature of Canadian/Newfoundland/British/American relations before and during the war period. In the earliest period, the British colonial government wished to maintain the control of trans-Atlantic air routes, which meant control over Gander. However in 1941 it was agreed to turn wartime control of the airport over to the RCAF. When the Americans came, both the British and Canadian governments (and particularly the second as it looked to the future), did not want the Americans have any claims on Gander. As a result, all construction was under the control of the RCAF which constructed, free of cost, the buildings on the American side, using the same building plans as those used elsewhere. The RC school was therefore of the same model of mess hall as that used by the Amalgamated School.

St. Joseph's

By PAT MCDONALD

We are all glad to see George Whelan back to school again, after a month's absence. George had the misfortune to injure his ankle during the month of September, and he has been wearing a cast since then.

The 21st of October was Boy Scouts' apple day. St. Joseph's troop together with St. Martin's troop had a very busy time organizing the first apple day in Gander, and their efforts were crowned with success. The response from the people was overwhelming—and deeply appreciated. We take this opportunity to thank the people very sincerely on behalf of St. Joseph's Troop.

The increase in the number of pupils this year necessitated the recent addition of an extra classroom. This room has been modernly equipped with fifty new combination-type seats and desks, a teacher's desk and four green chalkboards. All the classrooms in our school are similarly equipped with comfortable imported desks, fluorescent lighting, and green nucite chalkboards imported from England. The teachers also have at their disposal a film strip projector, a mimeograph, and a recording machine. A radio has already been ordered for the purpose of listening to the Atlantic School broadcasts; we understand too that a 16 mm projector has been made available for the school through the newly formed local film council.

It is now up to us, the pupils, to make the year a successful one.

Pro Deo et Patria.

During this approximate period, RC school enrolment was 110 students and three teachers, with Nellie Ryan as principal. The first teacher was a Ms Long.

Roman Catholic School System - new school

As Gander's population increased in the 1950s, the RC school system found itself with the same problem as the Amalgamated school, namely the need for a more modern school, as activities were transferred to the new townsite.

A new St. Joseph's school was built at the same time as the new Gander Academy. Both were built by Eastern Woodworkers, a company from Nova Scotia, at the following (cost in 1957 dollars):

St Joseph's school	358,027
Amalgamated school	654,672

The new St. Joseph's had 14 classrooms and an enrolment in 1957-58 of 545. The principal was Sister Dominica, BA, of the Presentation Order. Like Gander Academy, it catered to students from Kindergarten to Grade Eleven.



It was later torn down:



Conclusion

George Legros, for many years a member of the Amalgamated School Board made a remark that could have applied equally to St Joseph's: "The Gander Academy was designed with something like seven extra classrooms to allow for future growth. We thought it was a good move just in case we would need them in 10 or 15 years. Well, it took just two years!"

A former student of either of the two schools built in 1956-57 would be lost today. The denominational schools have been replaced by integrated schools. Middle schools were built for grades 7-9 and a new Gander Collegiate now caters to grades 10-12.

One can only hope they will live the effervescence of Old Gander.

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Principal sources

- ° Atlantic Guardian 1947, 1950, 1957
- ° "The Gander Traveller" November 1950
- ° Gander Academy school book 1957 (info notably by Pearl Strong, Joy Mercer, Joyce Noel, Loretta Smith, Jim Strong, Ron Mosher)
- ° Darrell Hillier (construction plan, Chestnut school)
- ° RCAF station magazine winter 1945
- ° Supplement to the Gander Beacon, 29 July, 1987
- ° Notes from "Fayes Pages" GA Flight website
- ° conversation or notes over the years from different present or former Gander residents, notably Dave Mercer, Bob McKinnon, Cliff Powell
- ° Documents on Relations between Canada and Newfoundland, Vol 1, edited by Paul Bridle, Dept External Affairs, 1974.