

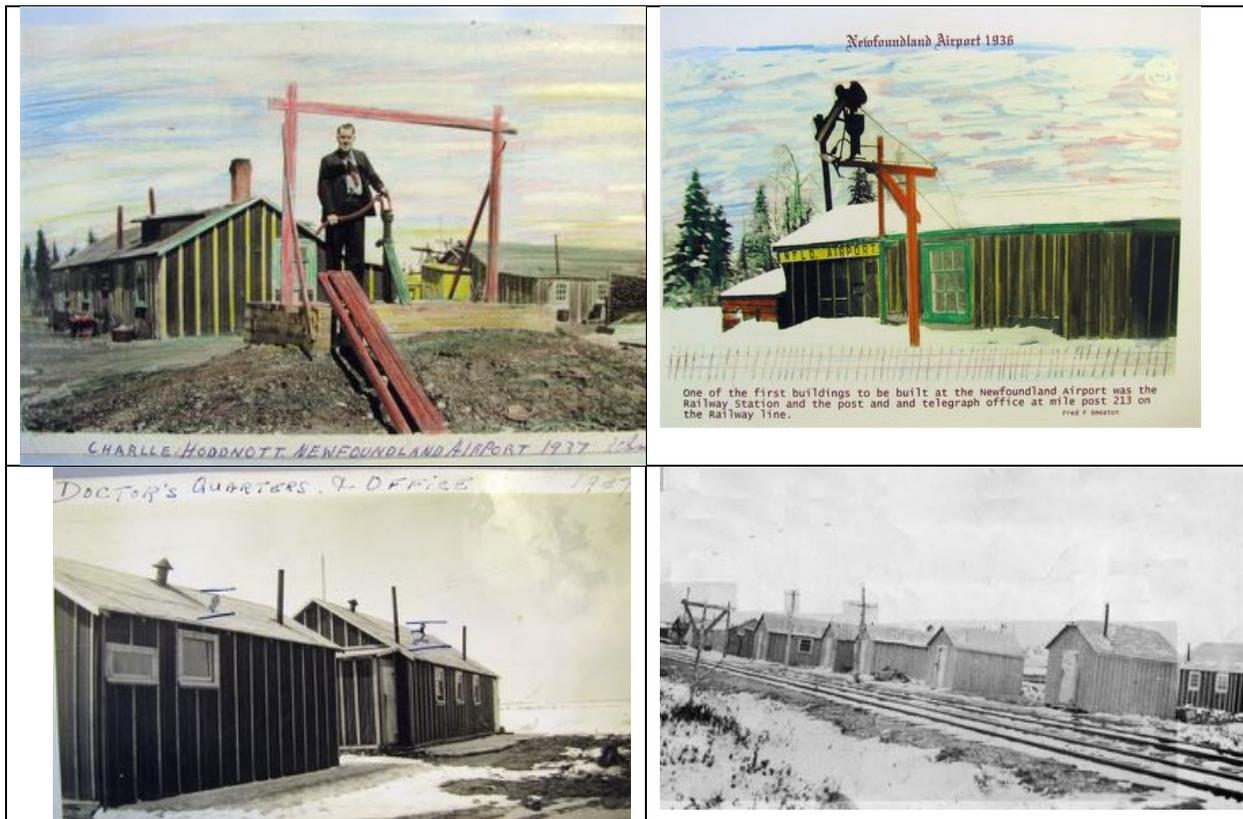
Civilian accommodations in old Gander_(v2)

(by Robert G Pelley 2022- 05-06)
bobsganderhistory.com

I have often been asked about living accommodations in old Gander which evolved from a rough and ready construction site to a military base and then to a hub for commercial trans-Atlantic aviation. Each of these periods had its characteristics and requirements for different types of staff.

The objective of this article is to provide a brief overview of these periods and to describe summarily the residences that were available at different times.

In the earliest period, “housing” was quite rudimentary even for supervisors, engineers and foremen.



Photos Fred Smeaton jr

The above photos give a good idea of the “tar paper” living conditions during the early construction period:

- the well with its hand-operated pump,
- the old original “Newfoundland Airport” railway station,
- the doctor’s office and quarters
- construction workers’ shacks along the railway line.

Gander, being an airport, required a control tower and people to man it. It also meant having weather information and therefore a meteorological staff. It also used radio communications. These needs led to the construction of the tower and administration building which housed a large part of this staff.



This building was finished in November 1938, in time for the arrival of Met and radio staff who had been supporting the flying boat operations in Botwood. This building was like a fine hotel. It included notably a dining room with fine china, a small theatre for films brought in from St. John’s, a rec room, a lounge and bar – the first one with a liquor license outside of St. John’s. It even had an office of Posts and Telegraphs, formerly set up in the railway station.

This photo shows the Administration Building bar:



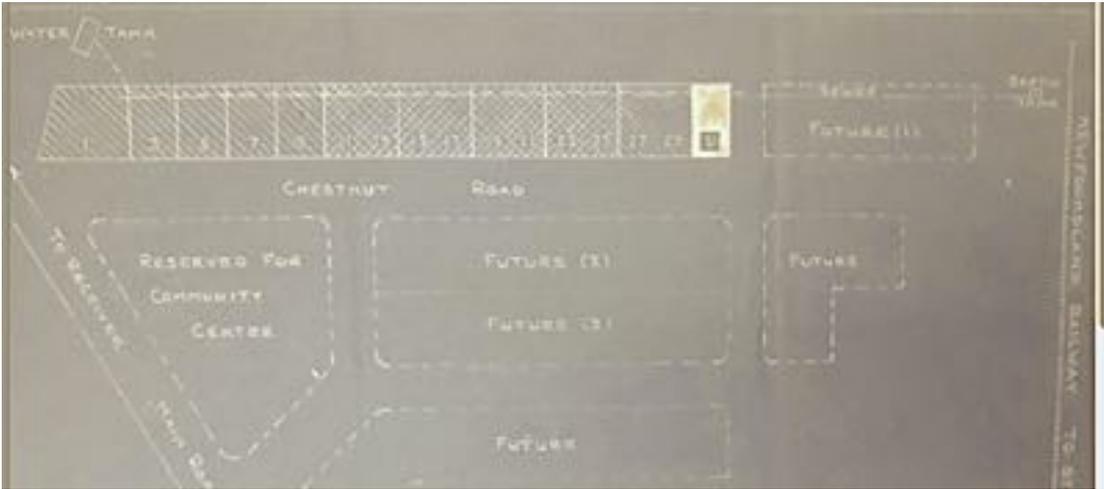
During this period, it became clear that the Administration Building was starting to bust at the seams. A “staff house” was built near the railway tracks to accommodate a growing staff.



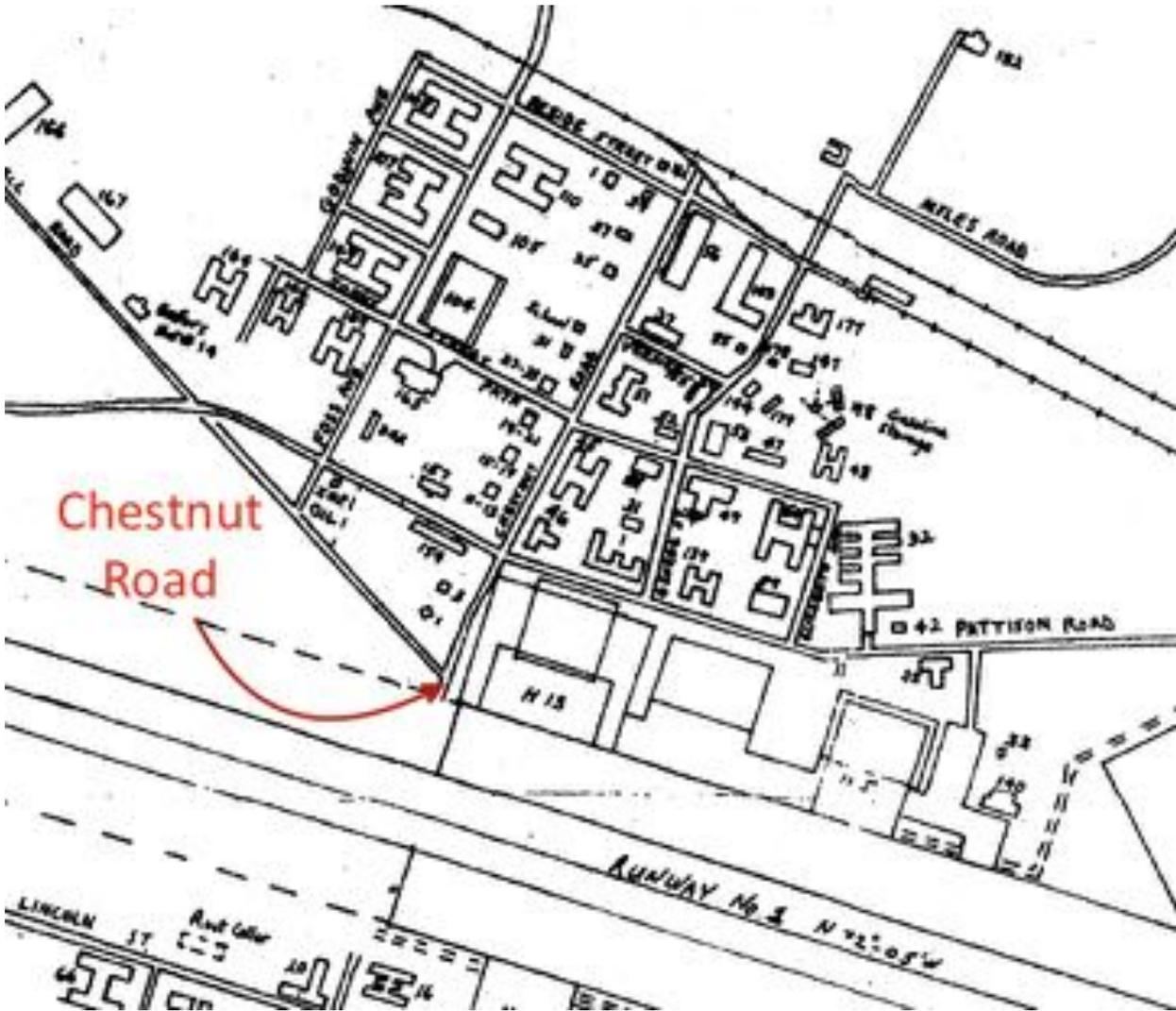
The next photo shows the general layout of Gander at the time.



At the same time, a number of families found themselves in Gander. These were generally those of managers of some nature, for example the airport manager or the boss of Shell Oil. These houses were built on Chestnut Road, perpendicular to the end of the east-west runway as can be seen in the sketch below. (Use zoom as needed) Shell house in yellow.



Chestnut Road
In relation to the
East-West runway



These houses were very well built as can be seen from the specifications for the Shell house:

Foundation - 8" concrete wall with 6" sub-soil drain entirely around it.
Basement floor - Concrete slab- 5".
Ground floor joist 2"x6", second floor joist 2"x7", ceiling joist 2"x6".
Porch joist 2"x4", Wall and Partition studs 2"x4".
Main Roof hip rafters 2"x10", Main Roof Jack rafters 2"x6", Porch rafters 2"x4".
Window & Door frames, soft Pine. All sash except basement weather stripped.
Outside trim, soft Pine & Fir. Inside trim, B.C. Fir.
Outside walls, T & G Spruce covered with tarred felt and cedar shingles.
Inside walls of "Kecosote".
Sub-floors of T & G Spruce, Top floors of 2 1/2 x 13/16 Birch except Vestibule, Bathroom and Kitchen, which are linoleum.
Outside doors of soft Pine, Inside doors B.C. Fir.

Clearance-

Basement floor to joist	8'- 0"
Ground " " ceiling	8'- 6"
Second " " "	8'- 0"

Roof, T & G Spruce, tarred felt & Barrett Giant Shingles.
Outside trim paint -
1 priming coat oil paint
2 coats oil paint.

Cedar Wall Shingles -
1 dip coat Solignum Creosote Stain.
1 brush " " "

Inside Paint (See attached schedule).
Heating Plant - Hot Air Furnace (Enterprise Foundry Co.), No. 516.
Cooking " - Regular Coal Range (Enterprise Foundry Co.), No. 818, equipped with "Oilbaroc" Oil Burner.

Plumbing - Hot Water Coil of brass in cooking range connects with 30 gal. "Everdur" copper storage tank. All water pipes 3/4" copper. Bathroom equipped with tub, toilet, lavatory. Kitchen equipped with single drain sink with cabinet below. Twin laundry tub in basement.

Auxiliary water supply - Rain water from roof basement cistern.
Lighting - Electric, open wiring to C.E.S.A. specifications.
Chimney - Two flue to take furnace and kitchen range outlets - all of Pelley's best quality red brick.

By mid-November, we can most of these houses having been constructed.



The following gives a better idea of what a typical duplex looked like, with the Smith family on the left and the Chafe family on the right. To the left of the house was the famous "Green Lane" that led later from John Street to the Gander Gardens, the Amalgamated School and Goodyear's canteen.



Gander was built where it was notably because it was along a railway line so necessary during the early years, bringing in workers, electrical products, food and even asphalt for the runways. Therefore, having a permanent staff, well taken care of, was essential. For the bosses, who could bring their family, five small houses were built just north of the railway station. These houses were all painted beige-yellow. Each had three bedrooms, a living room and a large kitchen with the proverbial wood/coal stove.



For the single men there was a railway staff house – the scene of many all-night poker games.



During the war, Gander was a military base, with tight controls over movements and with space allocated for purely military activities. For all intents and purposes, there was no construction of family homes, with several exceptions in the RAF Ferry Command area.

For example, Joey Smallwood, the operator of the piggery along the road to Deadmans Pond (and later-to-be premier of Newfoundland) had a small house. Part of the Smallwood house can be seen on the extreme right of the photo.



Photo Fred Smeaton jr

The Commanding Officer of the RAF also had a home near the hangers, called “The Barn”. After the war this became the home of the senior met officer.



The wartime population of Gander was somewhat over 7000, but at the end of 1946 had fallen to about 800. There was now in principle ample housing available from the vacated military buildings. However, quarters for soldiers in bunk beds, quartermaster's stores and headquarters buildings were not usable for families without considerable conversion.

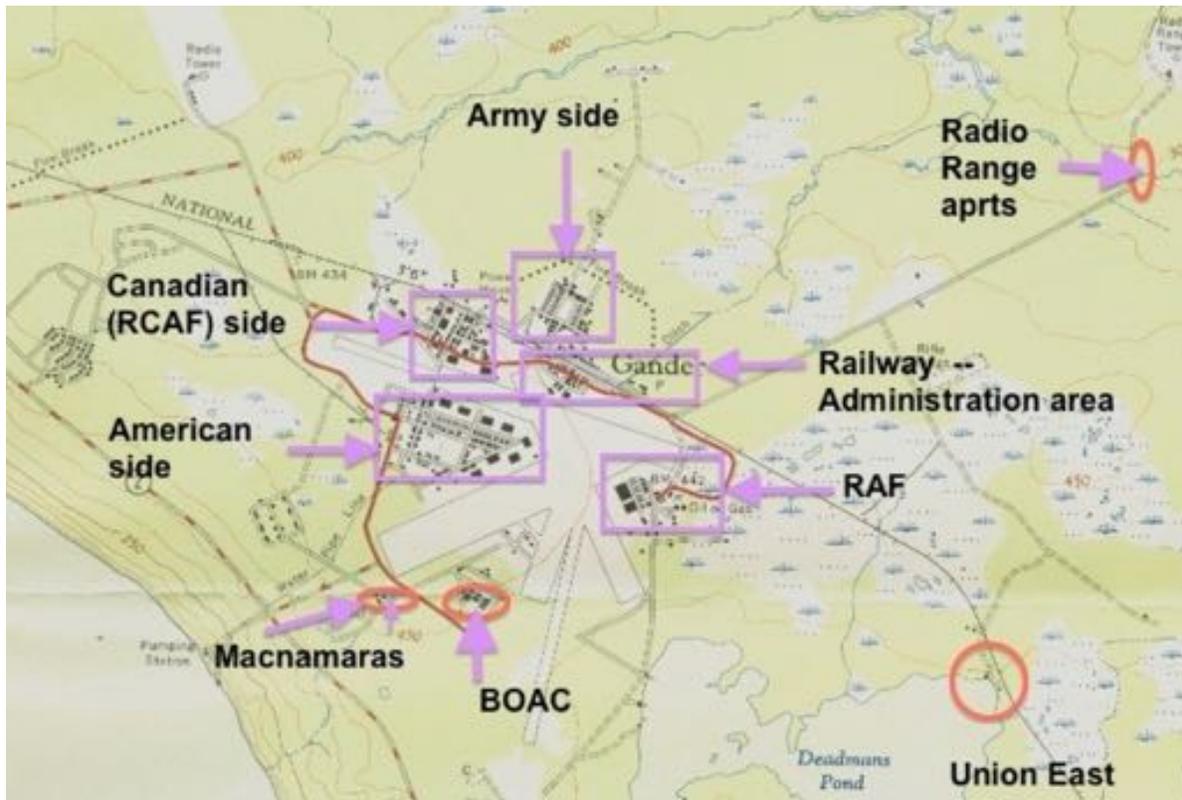
At first the buildings on the "Army Side" were converted, along with several - buildings near hangers 21 and 22 which became the aviation terminal and maintenance area. This was followed by the Airlines Hotel on the "American side", required for any overflow of passengers.



Bldg corner Fleet and Winston (Army side)

As civilian aviation operations came into swing, the need for personnel related to aviation increased greatly. Not only the airlines such as TWA, PAA, TCA and Scandinavian needed to accommodate the employees and now the families, there was also a need for refuellers, aircraft maintenance and other people working directly with the airplanes. Generally speaking, their accommodations were concentrated on the American side.

There was one notable exception to this general rule, namely BOAC, which took over the old anti-aircraft headquarters, halfway around the southern airport perimeter, between the RAF and American sides.



The airport as such after the war required quite a staff, from Met personnel to snowblower operators, to communications technicians to tradesmen such as carpenters, plumbers and metalworkers. Until Confederation these people were generally under the control of the Newfoundland government, after which they were employed by the federal DOT. These people tended to be housed on the “Canadian side” (former RCAF).

The housing in much of Gander, notably the Army side and the railway area were generally heated by coal-fired kitchen stoves. However, generally speaking, residential buildings were all connected to a steam plant in their vicinity. Steam was produced from coal which meant than clothes out to dry on the line came back dirtier from soot than when it went out. Even more surprising from today’s

perspective is that the pipes carrying the heat from the steam plant to the houses was covered in thick asbestos. The photo below of Foss Ave on the Canadian side shows well both the typical accommodations and the overhead steam pipes.



The top floor of a typical two-story H-building would be as follows:

- each quarter section would be divided length ways to provide two apartments
- these apartments would have a long hall with all the rooms on one side.
- generally there would a fairly large living room, a small kitchen with just enough space for a lovely set of formica-chrome-vinyl table with four chairs, a bathroom with tub and three bedrooms, the last of which, as master bedroom, gave access to a fire escape. This was usually a metal slide that, in direct sunlight, could become hotter than any fire could be.

There was generally another apartment in the cross section on both floors. Because access was easier, the bottom floor was not divided length ways.

However, as time went on, converted space became rare. Anything vaguely usable was taken over as living accommodations. As all usable space in Gander was converted, areas outside of the “regular housing” near the airport became more important (though some of these areas lodged families as early as the construction period). In the airport area, even emplacements for the 40-millimetre Bofors guns were modified as living quarters. Of the fifteen built during the war, two were eventually leased to private companies, five were removed but eight were converted to housing.

It was an unfortunate fact in post-war Gander that housing was not necessarily allocated on the basis, for example, of need, family size or even one's fortune. Availability of housing was decided strictly on the basis of one's employer (or former employer in one specific case). Simply put, if one worked, for example, for an airline, a refuelling company, Newfoundland Telegraphs, etc, housing was available in the "Shell building", the "Esso building", etc, depending on the employer.

The special case of help from a former employer was that of a number of veterans, facilitated by the "Veterans' Land Act, 1942" whose object was to aid veterans get re-established after the war. In 1950 the VLA began to provide loans to veterans who wished to construct their own homes. The land made available 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, Hillcrest, Beaverwood, Plumberville and Memorial Drive.



For those who had no official attachment, housing was harder to find and/or further away. There were three main areas: MacNamara's camp, Union East and Radio Range Road.

MacNamaras Camp was the site of a small quarry and crusher just off the end of what was a main runway leading out over Gander Lake. This is now the shorter of the two out over the lake and not in normal use. After the war, kids used to enjoy climbing to the top of a huge pile of sand just off the runway and watching the planes land, one after the other.

During the construction period and for sometime after, the workers in that area lived in rough tar paper shacks similar to those down by the railway line and not meant for families. However, given the lack of space, a Frank Goulding brought his family there in 1946, renting a shack for 10 dollars a month. Until MacNamaras Camp was closed down in the mid-1950s, around forty families lived there over the years, in sub-standard conditions.



Union East was another area outside the immediate airport and pre-dated Gander as such. A sawmill had been in place there in the early 1930s owned by M Baker, who may have been related to the Bakers from Bonavista area. They made notably

barrel staves. Given that families were not allowed in Gander during the construction or wartime periods, Union East, about two miles before Gander on the railway line, was just at the right distance. Located on the west end of Deadman's Pond, it had a shallow sandy bottom with a beach of sawdust.

For nature lovers, the sides of the road from Gander to Union East were full of wild roses ... but for kids who had sometime to walk the road or the tracks to get to school even in winter, there was more concern about the height of the snow. There was luckily a small general store.

In the mid-50s there were just over 100 people living in Union East, of which 80% were children and teenagers.

One other living area was the Radio Range buildings. They were about four miles north-east of the airport, out the road of that name. In the early 1950s it was occupied by seventeen people of which around ten were in their teens or younger. The structures in this were very varied, with several converted shacks and a number of what could best be described as cabins. Water was brought in from a nearby creek, while toilets were of the outhouse model. Conditions were sometimes slightly worse than at MacNamaras Camp.

Life in Gander as a pre-war construction camp, a wartime base and a hub of civil aviation was quite different from that of any other town in Newfoundland. It had an energy, a unique world-view and a geographical position that formed one's character. One can wonder to what measure the physical living accommodations of the time played a role. One thing is certain – the building of a new town was not a luxury.

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To see the names of the people who lived in these different area,

you can use to this link:

<http://bobsganderhistory.com/gene1.html>

Note and references - thanks in particular to:

- Darrel Hillier for notes on the Shell house
- Gary Pinsent for information certain “squatters” around Gander
- Frank Tibbo for general info clarifying certain points
- the late Fred Smeaton, jr, for a number of photos