

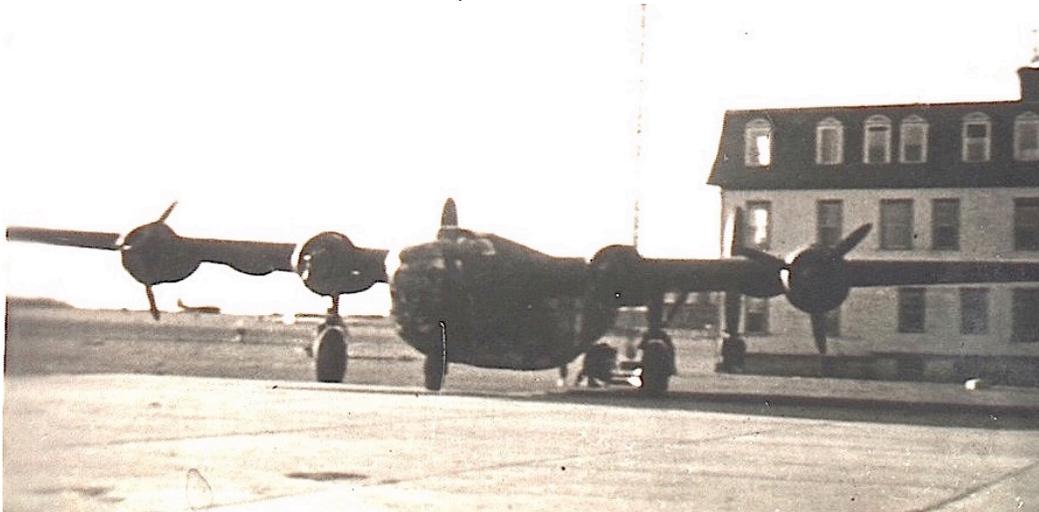
Gander's Airport Club (version 2)

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(Robert G Pelley 2018.04-07
bobsganderhistory.com)

During a special meeting in September 2017, the Gander Town Council voted to rezone the site of the former Airport Club. This change would permit the construction of a new private long-term care facility. The old club building was finally torn down on 08 March 2018.

But this building was just not some old structure getting in way of a more profitable endeavour. It was the home of a group with a rich history that started with the construction of the old Airport and like the old airport itself, it too was destined to disappear.

In the earliest days, Gander revolved around the railway station, its first hanger (n° 20) and the Administration Building. Living quarters for the transient construction crews were generally speaking tarpaper shacks near the railway line while the families of a number of managers lived in homes on Chestnut Avenue. The core of the permanent staff worked in (and often lived in) the Administration Building, as employees of the Post Office, MET (Weather) Service, Signals (radio-communication by Morse code) and the Tower. There was not much to do on time off, so the idea of social club took root.



West end of the Admin bldg with
a B-24 Liberator bomber in the foreground

In those days the site was not known as "Gander Airport" but rather as "Newfoundland Airport". So the Newfoundland Airport Club was officially set up on December 7, 1938, for the purpose of "providing social and athletic amenities for its members." The by-laws also noted that "the Club may promote and/or assist non-profit organizations which function for the benefit of the Gander community." As far as I could ascertain, this remained true over the years, with local schools being the beneficiaries, primarily via scholarships.

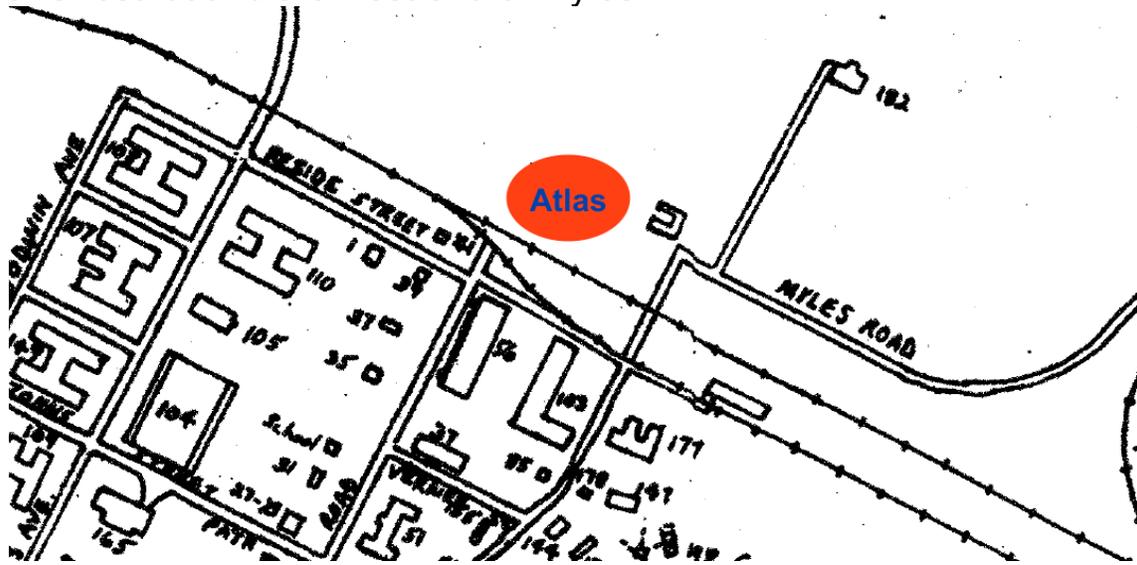
Hal Pattison was the first president, with Gerald Smith following in 1941. The first 34 members of the Airport Club must have been able to pull weight in high places because in February 1939 the Newfoundland government authorized a liquor licence for the lounge the new Administration Building, the first such licence in Newfoundland outside St. John's. There was no direct sale of liquor. One had to buy a "book of tickets" to be exchanged later.

Movie shows were shown every week. Billiards and card rooms were also available. While fine dining was not necessarily easy, there was no excuse for not having fine china. The photo below shows the personalized style used, apparently paid for by the Club itself rather than public funds.

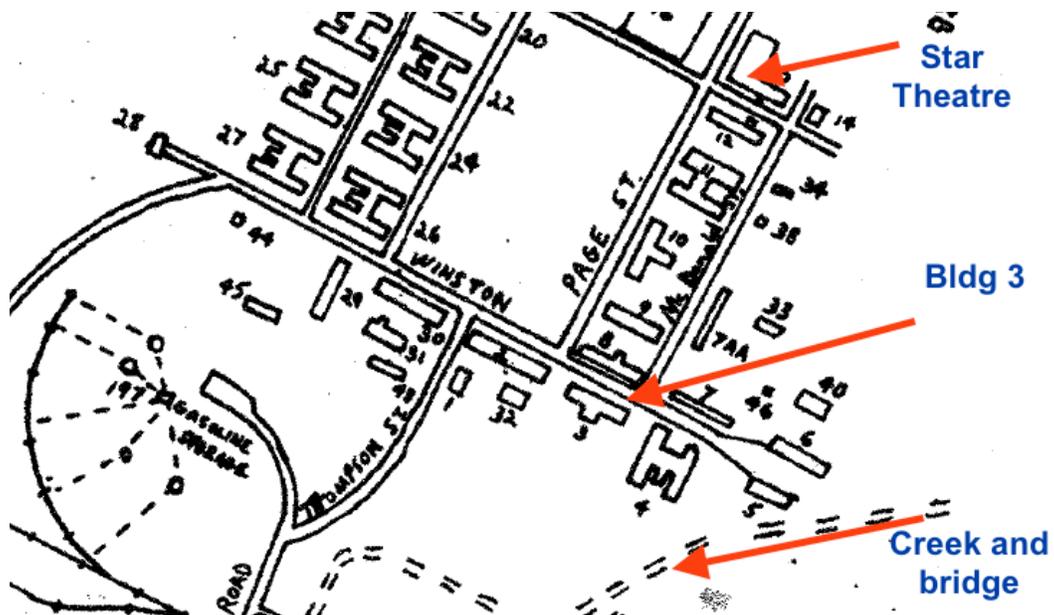


The by-laws provided for a maximum of 300 members, including 25 from outside Gander, and for a very long time there was a waiting list,

After the war, the Airport Club was like an unwanted child, leaving the Administration Bldg, wandering around the old airport looking for place to call home. It first found refuge in the a building left by Atlas Construction Company when it finished in Gander, near the north end of Chestnut and the west end of Myles.



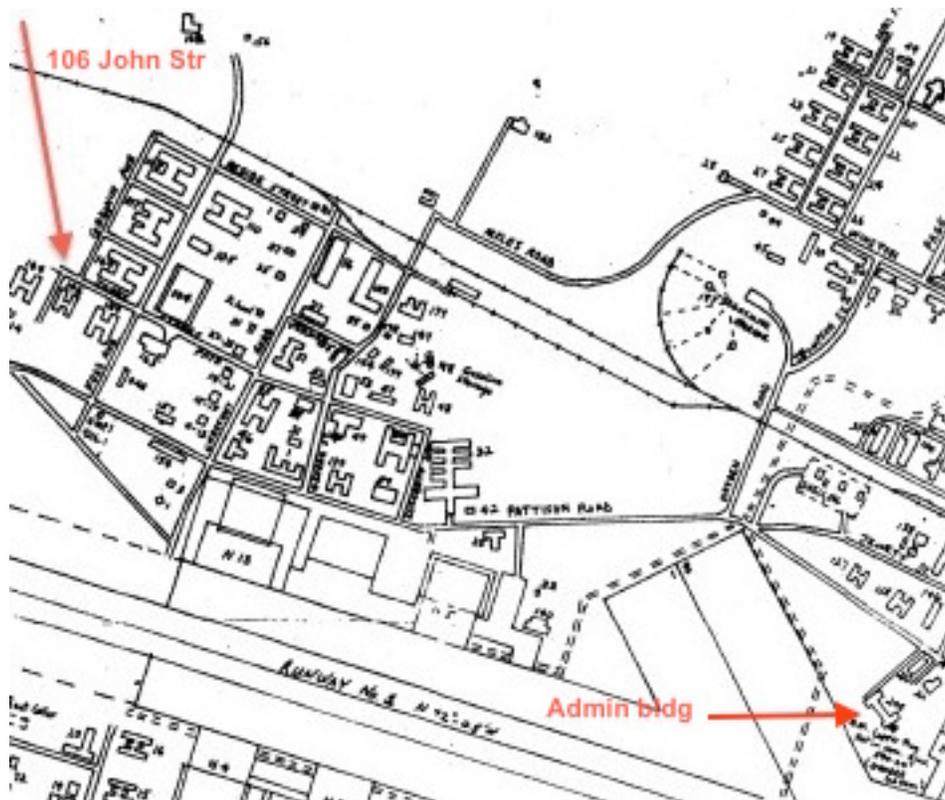
It moved again after a short while because the Atlas bldgs were being torn town, ending up in the Army Non Commissioned Officers Mess. Bldg 3 on the Army Side.



It then took up residence on the RCAF / Canadian side at 106 John Street.



This was a former RCAF officers' Mess, ideally suited to social functions.



In the late 1950s it became clear the Bldg 106 was destined to be torn down along with the other structures on the old airport. A new building was therefore built on the Trans-Canada Highway, just east of the Paton Memorial Hospital.

This was the new home of the Solidaires. The origins of the Solidaires was a band started in 1955 by Cliff Powell, Jerry Morrisey, Bill Stamp and Howard Moulard, called the Newfoundland Airport Orchestra. Ed Goff, a saxophonist whose day job was with Trans Canada Air Lines, joined the group and it became the Solidaires. A highlight in the Gander social scene for quite a few years was the Saturday night dance.

Gander changed over the years and finally the Airport Club wasn't the only show in town. A local promoter hoped to convert it to an eatery but ran into zoning problems and the building suffered from a lack of protection and upkeep over the years.

So another reminder of the rich history of Gander has disappeared. May its pioneering spirit live forever.