

# Gander's oldest standing buildings

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Just off the northern end of runway 21-03, Gander's longest, there is a remarkable old building. By all logic, it should be long gone by now. It is weather-beaten, unkempt, gutted and the target of bad graffiti artists. But it remains a witness to another time.

When people study places like old airports, the focus is usually on the efforts made to build it and on the bosses who led it. One might want to examine how it changed from a technical point of view or to read the story of the passengers who used it. Airplane crashes nearby usually are a subject of interest.

One point generally overlooked is how the place was kept clean and sanitary. One subject that attracts little attention, unless it is a place like Paris that offers guided tours, is the sewerage system.

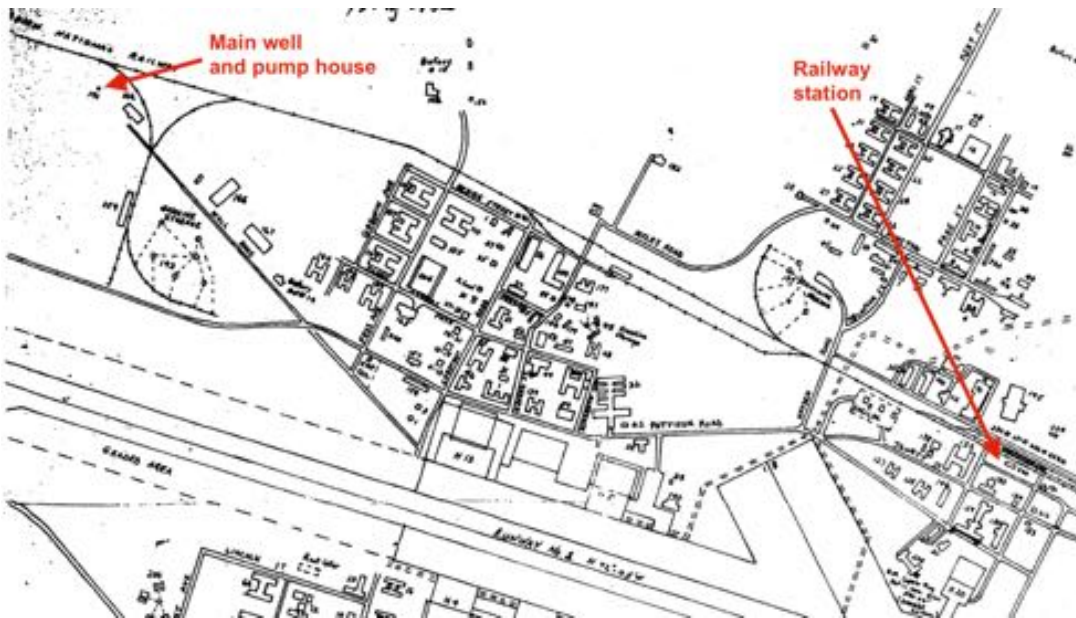
One reason why Gander was built where it is was because of the access by rail. The first buildings were therefore built close to the railway station and included the Administration Building, the world's largest hanger, a steam-heating plant and a diesel-driven powerhouse. At that point in Gander's history, the water supply was hand-pumped from wells, while sewerage was taken care of by septic tanks.



This did not always work out as planned! The general superintendent at the time, Fred Smeaton, snr, said this in an autobiographical note:

*We had another problem with the supply of water, we had one well situated just about where the railway station is now and that never had any more than a foot of water and it supplied most of our needs. We had sunk two wells down near the cookhouses but we had to condemn them afterwards because we found out that the cookies and cooks, instead of disposing their dirty slop water down a shoot which was there for that purpose, which took it into a drain going under track and down into a marsh, they just opened the door and threw it outside. The result was that it soaked down through the ground and got into the wells, the wells got so bad that they couldn't handle it and, consequently, we were left with only one well to supply the whole place.*

All this worked fairly well for a strictly civilian operation, especially as a new well was found about two kilometers west, quite some distance from any septic run-off.



However when the military arrived in Gander during the war, the situation changed. In early 1940, Canadian Army Engineers arrived to set up camps for the infantry and artillery required for airport security. On June 22 the 1st battalion Black Watch of Canada, with a strength of about 800, arrived in Botwood and moved to Gander to take over airport defence. They were set up in tents about a kilometer east of the railway station (corner of Radio Range Road) under field conditions. The Queen's Own Rifle replaced them

very shortly after, on 10 August, so little had been done in terms of sanitation.

The QOR immediately got to work, in particular their Pioneer Platoon, led by Lt. S. Lett. One of the first priorities was a garbage disposal system. By the middle of September, pioneer platoon had pretty much completed the camp drainage and sewerage.

The bulk of the Army personnel were eventually set up in proper hutments in another area of the airport. This area required of course a new sewerage disposal system. This was constructed near the north-east corner of the "Army side"



The rest of the airport was separate from this Army area system. The Canadian-American "Permanent Joint Defence Board" of 9-10 September 1941 gives the following progress report on construction at the "Newfoundland Airport":

*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
<b>Quarters</b>		
Officers	4 (147)	3 (264)
N.C.O.	4 (176)	0
O.R.	7 (952)	6 (2128)
<b>Messes</b>		
Officers	1 ( 50)	1 (300)
N.C.O.	1 (120)	1 ( 40)
O.R.	1 (450)	2 (1440)
<b>Other Buildings</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>41</b>

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.

The sewerage disposal plant mentioned here is now the oldest building still standing in Gander. The photo below is circa spring 1942.



The location can be seen more precisely with the following map:



After treatment, the water was filtered through the bogs to the north of Gander. There was basically no habitation north of the sewerage plant.

Below are several photos kindly provided by pilot Keith Lacey, who originally mentioned the old building after a flight. The building is in surprisingly good shape, well over 50 years after decommissioning. It was certainly helped by the pretty tough asbestos siding outside and concrete tank walls inside.





The phone number of the old sewerage plant was 271, but now there is no one to answer. It would appear that about a half-dozen men worked there on shifts, but only one name has so far been found, namely Mr Charles Smith. (It goes without saying that any additional info would be welcome.)

While the exact date is unknown as yet, it would seem that this sewerage disposal plant was closed down around the mid to late 50s. In April 1953, the design of the sewerage plan for the new town site was completed, but work continued for a number of years before becoming operational. The Airport sewer system is connected to that of the town of Gander.

As of 2019, Gander has awarded a \$18.7-million tender for the construction of anew wastewater treatment plant to the south east of Whitman's Pond.

Over the years, different plans have been made to repurpose this building, including a "jet and cycle" historical site, but without success. The Airport Authority advises that they have no plans for this facility at this time.

But hopefully something will come about that this old building remains standing, perhaps with a commemorative plaque. It is a reminder of the amazing project carried out in the 1930s and 40s and its contribution both to modern aviation and to saving civilisation from a Nazi dictatorship.

But there is another building in Gander that could well be from the same era. In the construction report given previously, there is an interesting entry as follows:

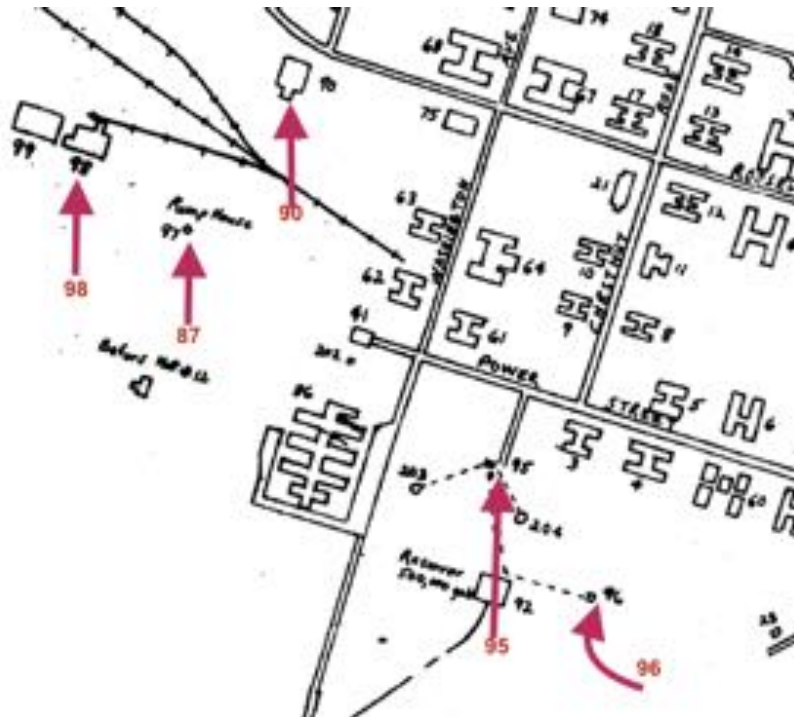
**The 10" pipeline to Gander Lake is all laid and foundations for the pumping station in hand.**

Other than the very early Deadman's Pond set-up, there were several pump houses in Gander. One was located down on the shores of Gander Lakes. There were others on the "American side", very near the area where the new terminal is now situated. I have been lead to believe that the pumping

station mentioned above would be the one down by the lake. This of course would be logical since the essential priority would have to be to get water up to the airport level plateau. As well, in other documents, it would appear that the structure by the lake is called the "pumping station", while those in the American side were called "pump houses".

The water supply on the American side came up in a 10-inch pipe and went into a 500,000-gallon reservoir, with two secondary 60,000-gallon tanks in the immediate vicinity. This was located basically speaking in the woods across the road just east of the "American hospital", the present day RCAF 9 Wing.

There were three pumps houses associated with these reservoirs. In bldg 95 was the pump for the domestic water supply, while a pump dedicated to fire-fighting was housed in bldg 96. There was another pump house, bldg 97, completely to the west of the American hospital. It is presumed that the location of this pump house is related to the large stockpile of coal stored in that area for both a steam plant (bldg 90) and a power house (bldg 98).



Bldg 95 still exists, as can be seen from the following Google overhead photo.



However if you look for it, you may get confused!

In the sketch maps, it was south of Power Street. In the photo, it is north of Power Street! This is because the original Power Street became James Boulevard and a rough road to the south, hardly more than a trail in the 1950s, was built up and named Power Street.

Except for bldg 95, none of the old system exists today. The pump station on Gander Lake was replaced in the mid 70s, in a slightly different location.





The present Gander water reservoir is located in town, slightly north of the Arts and Culture Centre.

Whether bldg 95 is older, newer or the same as age as the old sewerage plant, it too is a witness of another time. It is still standing but dearly in need of tender loving care.



Right now, today, it is highly salvageable at fairly little cost but time will quickly take its toll. Now is the time to incorporate it into the history of the airport before it is gone forever. Imagine it all cleaned with a plaque describing its use and context, along a few photos.

The outside of the airport is historically as important as the inside!

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Thanks to Keith Lacey for his help with the sewerage plant section.  
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