

Newfoundland & Labrador Railway and Coastal Mail Steamer Database

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This Excel Spreadsheet is a companion to the Canadian Railway Post Office Database and is based on data contained in "Travelling Post Office Postmarks of Newfoundland & Labrador – Second Edition (2016)" also the "Compendium of Related Information" compiled by Brian Stalker, both published by BNAPS, and cumulative updates published since then.

Service Providers:

(1) Railways: All railways in Newfoundland were "narrow-gauge" (3ft 6 inch). The first railway was partly constructed by an American company, "**The Newfoundland Railway Company**" who soon ran out of funds and it was left to the government to complete the line from St. John's to Harbour Grace – later becoming the **Conception Bay Railway**. The next major player was **R G Reid** and his sons who contracted to build a line to Hall's Bay, but before reaching there the government decided that Reid's should extend the line to Port aux Basques on the SW tip of Newfoundland. That then became the **Newfoundland Northern & Western Railway**; however the **HALLS BAY RTPO** postmarks were used throughout the construction period.

By mid-1898, the main line between St. John's and Port aux Basques (547 miles) was complete and after a protracted legal battle the government had gained ownership of the original Newfoundland Railway Company from the bond-holders. A few months earlier "**The Newfoundland Railway Act, 1898**" was passed – whereby operation of the entire railway system was handed over to R G Reid. Amongst other provisions, Reid was to provide seven mail steamers to serve Newfoundland and Labrador's coastal communities and to operate an all-year-round steamer service between Port aux Basques and North Sydney (100 miles), connecting there with Canada's Intercolonial Railway. The 1898 Reid Contract was subsequently vested in the **Reid Newfoundland Company (RNC)**.

Despite some politically-inspired bad press, the RNC appears to have discharged its contractual obligations reasonably efficiently. However, by the end of World War I the railway system required major investment to remedy the damage done carrying unprecedented volumes of traffic supporting the war effort with minimum maintenance. There then followed several years of joint management under a Railway Commission until on July 1st 1923 Reid's withdrew from the 1898 Contract and ownership of the railway and coastal steamer service reverted to the government – becoming the **Newfoundland Government Railway**, subsequently abbreviated to the **Newfoundland Railway**.

That remained the case until April 1st 1949 when Newfoundland confederated with Canada and the entire railway / steamer service became a division of **Canadian National Railways**.

(Note: in the early 1900s several **mining and logging railways** were constructed, mainly in mid-Newfoundland. Some of these received payment for carrying mail but none operated travelling post offices.)

(2) Coastal Mail Steamers: whereas Waterways played a minor part in the Canadian Railway Post Office Database, they constitute the major part for Newfoundland & Labrador. Prior to the 1898 Reid Contract which integrated rail and coastal mail steamer services several of Newfoundland's bays were served by sailing packets or steam packets. Two main mail routes – the **Coastal North** and **Coastal West** mail services – were contracted to **Joseph Wood** from 1888-1900, and the Labrador TPO was tendered on an almost annual basis. Despite the almost-monopoly of the Reid Contract, in 1904 the government contracted with **Bowring Brothers** to reintroduce the Coastal North and Coastal West services, and between 1910 and 1919 further tendering saw the **Newfoundland Produce Company**

and the **Susu Shipping Company** being contracted to operate mail steamers to **Fogo District** and within **Fortune Bay**.

By 1919 the Bowring Brothers contract had been taken over by the Ministry of Shipping, Reid's had departed the transport services scene in 1923 and by 1925 the Fogo District and Fortune Bay TPO services had been subsumed into the Newfoundland (Government) Railways. As with the railway system, the coastal mail services transferred to the **Canadian National Railways** in 1949.

Waterway Mileages: While reasonable effort has been made to determine waterway route lengths all distances quoted are "each-way" and a first approximation quoted to the nearest 10 miles. In practice, the route lengths varied as ports of call were added or removed from the roster, and on a trip-by-trip basis the vagaries of wind, tide and ice could make significant differences from the nominal mileage.

Distances preceded by an approximation (~) sign indicate that we have not been able to locate published data so they are a best-guess. Where two mileages are quoted it is an indication that two routes were served by Bay Steamers, or in the case of the Coastal West service the winter route terminated at Channel (Port aux Basques) but extended to Bonne Bay in the summer. For Labrador, the usual terminus was Hopedale but at least twice a year the route was extended to Nain.

(Note: The Coastal West, South Coast, Placentia Bay, Fortune Bay and Cabot Strait services operated all-year-round. The Coastal North and northern bay TPO services usually operated from early May to late December and the Labrador TPO routes were generally ice-free from July to late November.)

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