

Railway Coastal Museum e-Bulletin

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Keith Collier

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Canals Across Newfoundland

In 1902, the railway in Newfoundland had just been completed, and its potential as a major transportation system was only beginning to be realized. But that did not stop some people from imagining even bigger things.

In a pair of articles published that year in the Newfoundland Quarterly, government surveyor James P. Howley proposed that canals could be cut through Newfoundland to facilitate the movement of ships between Europe and North America. The main advantage of this, he argued, would be the avoidance of “danger zones” located in the Strait of Belle Isle and the shores surrounding Cape Race, areas where ships were frequently wrecked. Instead of trying to navigate around Newfoundland, ships should simply go through it.

Although this idea sounds extraordinary, Howley laid out exactly how it might be done. The first of his proposals involved cutting a canal across the isthmus of the Avalon Peninsula, from Bull Arm to Placentia Bay. By taking this route, ships coming from Europe could avoid the frequently fogged-in Southern Shore and make instead for Trinity Bay, where better navigational aids would also assist shipping. Once through the canal, ships could proceed to Halifax or up the St. Lawrence River.

Anyone familiar with the area knows that the island is very narrow at that point. In fact, as Howley points out, the distance

“from

water to water” is only 1¾ miles. When one considers the huge canal projects under construction or completed at that time, the idea seems much less unlikely. The Panama Canal was under discussion in 1902, and would be 48 miles long when finished. The great Suez Canal had opened in 1869 and was 119 miles long. And the Caledonian Canal, which cut right through the middle of Scotland, was finished in 1822 at a length of 62 miles.

With these projects in mind, cutting a mere 1¾ miles across Newfoundland does not seem like such a difficult undertaking.

But Howley’s second idea was even more inventive. This time he suggested that ships could go right through the middle of Newfoundland, from Green Bay on the north coast to Bay St. George in the west.

Howley’s scheme for the west coast hinged upon the use of Grand Lake as the central part of the canal. The distance between Green Bay and Bay St. George is 130 miles, and Grand Lake already provided a navigable waterway for 55½ of these miles. The trick would be to link Grand Lake to Green Bay to the northeast, and to Bay St. George to the west. To do this, Howley proposed a series of canals and dams that would raise the level of Grand Lake and link it to Sandy Lake and Birchy Ponds, thereby reducing the actual canals necessary to about 45 miles in total. Locks would be necessary, since Grand Lake is well above sea level.

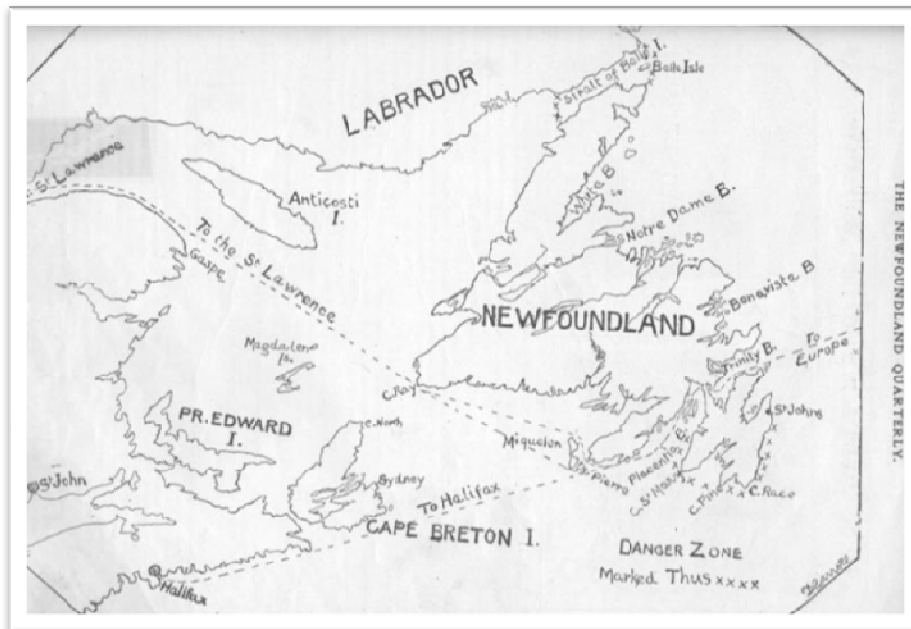
Adding to the usefulness of this proposal was the fact that coal seams had been

discovered near the head of Grand Lake. If they were to be exploited, coal-powered ships could be refueled almost directly from the coal mines themselves.

Of course, Howley's schemes for canals across Newfoundland were never realized, but one can't help but wonder how they would have changed the development of the

island if they had been. The Grand Lake scheme, especially, had the potential to link the mineral and timber resources of the interior of Newfoundland almost directly to the sea, which would almost certainly have contributed to a greater level of development in the area than the railway alone.

Map of Howley's Proposed Canal Route Across the Isthmus of Avalon



Do you have a story about the Newfoundland Railway?

We'd love to hear it!

We appreciate any comments, questions, or feedback you may have.

kcollier@railwaycoastalmuseum.ca

(709) 724-5929 or toll-free 1-866-600-7245

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