

Man of Mystery: Mr. James Hayman Bird



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In honour of African-Canadian History Month I went on a search for people of African descent who helped to shape the railway. According to Penney and Kennedy's book [A History of the Newfoundland Railway](#), most of the families of African descent that worked and lived in Newfoundland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were part of the Reid Railway as Porters or other skilled workers.¹ One of the skilled workers brought here by the Reids was a well known teamster named James Hayman Bird.

The 1921 Whitbourne census tells us that James Bird was born in Kentucky in 1851.² It is unclear how Reid met Mr. Bird, but it was Reid's ability to recognize talent and skill that drove him to bring Mr. Bird to Newfoundland. James Bird was a teamster of great ability and was often said to be "the best teamster that ever drove a horse in Newfoundland."³ Teamsters in earlier centuries were people who drove a team of horses usually for freight hauling purposes.

¹ Penney, A.R & Kennedy, Fabian. [A History of the Newfoundland Railway](#). Harry Cuff Publishing Limited. St. John's, NL. 2003. Pg. 38

² Courtesy of Judy Gosse of the Whitbourne Museum

³ *Ibid.*, Pg. 38

Building a railway would require transporting a lot of heavy goods, such as the steel rails and railway ties. Having a good teamster would therefore be an important part of railway construction. It is unclear how long Mr. Bird worked for the Reids, but once his services were no longer needed he settled in Newfoundland and built a life in Whitbourne.



James Bird's store in Whitbourne, with Mr. Harry Kilpatrick Jr. in the door.

Unfortunately not much is known about James Bird's life, but here is what I managed to gather: Mr. Bird married Mrs. Mary Spence, of Whitbourne, who took his name and was known as Mary Bird. In the 1920s, Mr. Bird owned a small shop near the Whitbourne station platform, which advertised soft drinks and cigarettes. At this

time, Mr. Bird was mostly blind. He lived out the rest of his days in Whitbourne, where he died on September 27th 1930.⁴ He was buried in the United Church Cemetery.⁵



Right to left above: James Hayman Bird, his wife Mary Spence, and an unknown male.

Much of James Bird's life is a mystery to us; how did he feel about Newfoundland and working for the Reids? How did he fall in love, and why did he decide to stay in Whitbourne? Was his life better here than it was in Kentucky? The answers may never be known, but despite these uncertainties we do know that Mr. Bird's skills were prized by the Reids, and that he was respected as one of the best teamsters in Newfoundland.



James Hayman Bird driving horses.

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If you have any stories you would like to share about the railway we would love to hear them!

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⁴ Date of death courtesy of Judy Gosse of the Whitbourne Museum.

⁵ Gosse, John S.R. Whitbourne – Newfoundland's First Inland Town: Journey Back in Time ... 1884 – 1984. John S.R. Gosse. Whitbourne, NL. 1985. Pg. 19.