

Newfoundland – Background

Population (circa 1860): 122,000

Urban centre: Saint John's (30,475)

Key figures: Frederick B.T. Carter (1819-1900)
Ambrose Shea (1815-1905)



Newfoundland is largely unknown to the other British North American colonies, especially the Canadas. Without Labrador, it is nearly the size of the other three Maritime colonies put together. Most of the island is uninhabited. Its coasts are charted, but the island's interior—consisting of dense forest, swamps, rock, without roads of any kind—remains unmapped. The land is so rugged that fewer than one hundred square miles are cultivated.

The colony's population settled in the southeast corner of the island. St. John's, the colony's capital and urban centre, is at the easternmost point of North America. These geographical factors make Newfoundland's link with Britain—to the east across the Atlantic—more immediate than its ties to North America. From its earliest days, Newfoundland has traded fish with Britain, in exchange for manufactured goods. The colonists wear British-made clothes, read British newspapers and magazines and, for many, London feels closer than Ottawa.

Fishing and seal hunting, traditionally the backbone of the Newfoundland economy, have been virtually nonexistent for years. Without these staple industries, many Newfoundlanders are nearly destitute. Debt is common among fishermen, and one-third of all money generated in Newfoundland is used to help the poor.

Britain's new attitude towards the colonies has left many Newfoundlanders worried. Since the early eighteenth century, French fishermen have caught fish in Newfoundland's waters and dried them on the island's west shore. Newfoundlanders suspect that the French would like to use this land for more than drying fish. Newfoundland relies on the British navy for protection. Though Newfoundland does not directly border on the United States and there is no threat of an American attack, Britain's reluctance to provide colonial defence in the future worries Newfoundland. As an island, a rail link with the other British North American colonies is irrelevant. But without the support of the British navy Newfoundlanders wonder how they will defend themselves.