

Architectural Survey of Port Union, NL
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Overview

The town of Port Union is located on the southern extreme of Catalina Harbour on the Trinity Bay side of the Bonavista peninsula approximately 120 kms northwest of St. John's by sea. It was established in 1916 as the headquarters for the Fishermen's Protective Union (FPU). This then empty stretch of coastline was chosen primarily for its access to a large, deep, ice-free harbour that could accommodate ample numbers of large tonnage ships. In addition, there existed plenty of space for building, an ideal condition for the planned town envisioned by FPU leader William F. Coaker. A nearby water supply could be harnessed for hydro power and a spur railway easily constructed from the existing Bonavista Branch railway line. Most importantly, the new town would be located on the northeast coast, the area with the greatest concentration of FPU fishermen.

Building of the town began in 1916 under the leadership of Coaker. When completed a few years later, Port Union would boast facilities and services comparable in function and scale only to St. John's, including community wide electricity and running water. Port Union became a physical expression of the FPU's efforts to achieve commercial independence from merchants through lessening outport fishermen's dependency on the merchant controlled credit system.

Port Union has twice received national recognition, with the 1985 designation of William F. Coaker as a person of national historic significance by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada and the designation of the town as a national historic site in 1998. The Port Union Historic District National Historic Site of Canada Commemorative Integrity Statement notes Port Union as

an outstanding example of a significant social phenomenon, that of the establishment of a union town noted for its commercial success in the face of aggressive competition from commercial merchants in Newfoundland.

In an attempt to promote this unique history and to protect the architectural integrity of the site, the Town of Trinity Bay North recently declared Port Union a Municipal Heritage District under the Municipalities Act of Newfoundland and Labrador. The Sir. William F. Coaker Foundation has also applied to the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador seeking provincial heritage district status for the section of town with direct ties to the Fishermen's Protective Union.

Most of the commercial and domestic buildings in the proposed district are owned by the Union Trading Company, a real estate holding company controlled by the executors of the Aaron and Ella Bailey Trust. Coaker's Bungalow, Port Union Museum and Coaker Monument are operated by the Port Union Museum Association, which is partially funded by the Trust

The Sir William Ford Coaker Heritage Foundation is the principal organization active in preserving and operating the historic district. The Foundation presently owns several buildings in Port Union, including the Factory/Advocate Building which is operated as an interpretation centre.

Very little modern construction has taken place within the original boundaries of Port Union, which means that the historic district is very largely intact and free of intrusive elements and that its original plan is readily discernible.

Historic Context

The town of Port Union was first conceived by Sir William Ford Coaker, a St. John's born union activist. Coaker formed the Fisherman's Protective Union in 1908 as a means of empowering fishermen during a time when the truck or credit system of trade was the prevalent mode of economic exchange throughout outport Newfoundland and Labrador. Under Coaker the FPU established trading stores, a newspaper and a political party which fought for social and economic reforms. Coaker chose to move the main FPU office out of St. John's in an effort to decrease overhead, develop free from Water Street merchant imposed constraints and be more centrally located in the heartland of FPU membership. In 1916 the FPU headquarters were founded on the southern side of Catalina Harbour. The town of Port Union, specifically designed to house these headquarters, became a physical expression of the combined efforts of Coaker and FPU fishermen to introduce a new economic reality to a centuries old system.

In an attempt to provide fishermen with an option to the merchant credit system, the FPU operated a fish buying and processing company along with retail stores. It also paid fishermen in cash. The FPU created five companies: the Union Export Company, the Union Trading Company, the Union Shipbuilding Company, the Union Publishing Company and the Union Electric Light and Power Company. By 1917, the Union Trading Company supplied 40 FPU stores in other outports, particularly along the northeast coast of the island of Newfoundland. By the late 1920s, the FPU held over 5000 fishing accounts. Port Union was a vital player in an international fish trade, playing host to FPU representatives from around the island and international fish buyers.

By 1921 Port Union had a population of 532 - an autonomous town, with its own hydro-electric generating plant and a factory to build house components. The scale of Port Union's industrial, commercial and institutional buildings had no comparison in outport Newfoundland for the time. The fish plant boasted the latest technology for drying fish, comparable equipment available only in St. John's. Homes were constructed for workers and rented at modest rates. Most of these staff homes were duplexes, an architectural form uncommon in outports. All homes had electricity and water, while some even had indoor plumbing, a rarity outside St. John's in the early decades of the twentieth century.

A fire in 1945 claimed a large section of the industrial and commercial district. Buildings in this section were quickly rebuilt with similar designs and functions. The FPU continued to export cod through 1950s. The Union Electric Light and Power Company merged with Newfoundland Light and Power in 1966 and the FPU retail store operated until 1977.

Boundaries

Port Union offers a well defined, compact historic district with few modern intrusions. Its entrance is marked by a huge rock cut to the northwest, with ocean to the north, woods to the east and a community recreational area to the south. The general arrangement of buildings is around a triangle of streets, namely Main Street, Reid Road and Coaker Drive. The incorporation of a small dirt road on the northwestern end of Coaker Drive allows for the inclusion of a large rock once used to dry fish. An area to the northeast contains artifacts remaining from a shipbuilding yard and seal plant.

The historic district is dominated by large imposing buildings on the harbour to the west. These commercial and industrial buildings are mainly clustered along the water with staff housing to the southwest in places where the land allowed for construction.

Resources

Industrial and commercial facilities remaining in Port Union include the Salt Fish Plant (1946), Fish Plant Pier (date unknown), FU Trading Company Store (1946), Union Electric Company Office (1946), Hotel/FU Trading Company Office (1946) and Factory/Advocate Building (1923). These are clustered along the western waterfront on Main Street. To the east of these are the Post Office (post 1949) and the Railway Station/Museum (1916). West on Coaker Drive is Holy Martyrs Anglican Church (1946), the only FPU related institutional building remaining.

Of the 50 residential buildings constructed by 1925, ten Manager's Houses (5 two-storey duplexes built circa 1918) remain across from the Factory/Advocate Building. To the rear of these duplexes are two outbuildings, one older shed and one more recent structure. To the east near Reid Road, five Manager's Houses (1916-25) built as single family residences remain, including one shed behind the Station Manager's House. West of the church along Coaker Drive are fourteen Staff Houses (7 two-storey duplexes built circa 1920) and one related outbuilding. Six Staff Bungalows (3 one-storey duplexes built circa 1916-1925) and one related outbuilding are situated along Bungalow Hill heading southwest. Coaker's Bungalow (1917) fronts on Main Street and Bungalow Hill.

Several houses in the historic district were built privately, including Bill Parady's House (1910) on southeastern end of Coaker Drive, a Bungalow (post 1945) across from Coaker Bungalow and Margaret Bailey's Bungalow (1917-1925) on the northwestern end of Coaker Drive.

Ruins, footings and structural artifacts in the historic district include the ruins of the Salt Fish Store/Coal Shed (burned 1945) next to the Salt Fish Plant, the Forge Site northeast of FU Trading Company Store, the footings of the Temperance Plant (burned 1945) next to the Hotel/FU Trading Company Office, Congress Hall (burned 1960) on the southeastern end of Coaker Drive and structural artifacts associated with the Seal Plant/Union Shipbuilding site north of Reid Road.

Landscape features include the Coaker Bungalow Grounds (1917) on Bungalow Hill, the Coaker Memorial Cemetery (ca. 1938) on Coaker Drive, the Fish Drying Rock on Main Street, the planned street triangle of Reid Road, Main Street and Coaker Drive and the informal pathway known as Tap Hill, which descends to the west from the southwestern end of Bungalow Hill.

Several buildings were constructed more recently and are not considered cultural resources, including a reconstructed Manager's House duplex (late 1990s) across from the Factory/Advocate Building, the Caretaker's Cottage (1950) on the Coaker Bungalow Grounds, a Garage (1950s) on Main Street, a reproduction Fishing Stage (late 1990s) on Main Street, the Power House Museum(1970-1979) on Main Street and a Modern House (circa 1980) along Reid Road.

Nature of resources

Port Union retains its original planned layout, consisting of distinct commercial and residential areas with few modern intrusions. The flat land near Port Union's northwestern waterside was ideal for commercial and industrial buildings and it is in this prominent location that the most important structures are situated, including the Salt Fish Plant, Fish Plant Pier, FU Trading Company Store, Union Electric Company Office, Hotel/FU Trading Company Office and Factory/Advocate Building. Most of these were rebuilt following the 1945 fire but retain their functional design with the introduction of materials common at the time of rebuilding, such as cedar-grained asbestos siding on the Salt Fish Plant, FU Trading Company Store and Union Electric Company Office.

The Salt Fish Plant and FU Trading Company Store stand as the most impressive monuments to the commercial success of the Union and to the financial independence of Port Union's residents. Business and trade conducted at this premises was of an international scope. The buildings have been vacant for several years now but despite some vandalism and neglect they remain structurally sound.

The Factory/Advocate Building has remained largely unchanged and has undergone extensive restorations. It is the only original commercial building remaining and contains one of the oldest elevator shafts in the province, an example of the Union's progressive ideology. It was the production site for the FPU's paper *The Advocate* and still houses the original printing press, an important component of Newfoundland's publishing history.

The Anglican church is the only surviving institutional building from Coaker's time. The FPU leader felt that workers' needs included not only fair wages and decent accommodations, but also their spiritual well-being. Built to commemorate the Coaker Recruits of WWI, it was part of the planned town and also burned in the 1945 fire. It was rebuilt the following year in the intended Gothic Revival style, except it lacks the original steeple and has vinyl siding.

The FPU's concern to provide decent accommodations for its workers is reflected in the duplex row housing throughout the community. These wood frame homes are vernacular in appearance with a functional design. Similar staff home designs were standard for single industry towns in Canada from 1900-1920. The two storey duplexes are possibly of a British design origin, originally having two central doors, each flanked by a window, and four windows across the second storey with small porches at the rear. Originally some of the duplexes had two storey bays. The appearance, scale, massing, layout and orientation of the duplexes remains the same despite alterations such as the removal of original bay windows, the addition of vinyl siding and some modern windows on the Main Street duplexes houses. The duplexes on Coaker Drive are relatively unchanged as are the staff bungalows on Bungalow Hill. However, the physical state of these houses is increasingly desperate. Several of the duplexes are noticeably sagged and in need of immediate stabilization. The services originally provided in these homes (electricity and plumbing) reflect the modern character of the town. The linear alignment and spacing of the duplexes reflect the planned nature of Port Union and their scale, design and materials reflect their communal construction and ownership.

Small differences in housing styles reflect the social distinctions and hierarchy of FPU employees. While the duplexes employ simple construction techniques with few exterior embellishments, the single family dwellings are more impressive in their exterior detailing. Three single family staff houses remain in good structural condition and are unaltered but two have been drastically altered.

Coaker's Bungalow is the most impressive dwelling in Port Union. While some vernacular influences are apparent, it is clearly a Queen Anne inspired home with its asymmetrical facade, corner tower, irregular roof line, dormers and projecting porch. Located in the centre of town it is a focal point in the community. It largely retains its original character with some additions to the east and south facades and exterior aluminum siding. Coaker's Bungalow was the site of much FPU business and it presently serves as a museum.

The Post Office (post 1949) and the Railway Station/Museum (1916) on Main Street are testaments to the scope of government services in Port Union, both pre and post-Confederation. The Railway Station/Museum has been moved from its original location but retains all original architectural features. It is a one-storey rectangular wooden building with a low pitched hipped roof. Large eaves extend out over the wooden porch, once acting as a weather guard for those waiting at the station. In addition to the roof, other traditional elements of this building that have been maintained over the years include the narrow wooden clapboard and window and door placement. The Railway Station/Museum is significant due to its associations with transportation in Newfoundland and because it exemplifies the kind of railway station used throughout the island during the 100 years the railway operated. The Post Office, while modest in scale and design, is representative of government service buildings in post confederation Newfoundland. It is clad in wooden clapboard with modern windows throughout.

Ruins, footings and structural artifacts in the historic district, including the ruins of the Salt Fish Store/Coal Shed, the Forge Site, the footings of the Temperance Plant, Congress Hall and structural artifacts associated with the Seal Plant/Union Shipbuilding site, provide a fuller appreciation of the original, complete town plan and offer great interpretive potential.

Landscape features including the Coaker Bungalow Grounds, the Coaker Memorial Cemetery, the Fish Drying Rock on Main Street, the planned streets and informal pathways also contribute to the overall historic value of the site. The Coaker Memorial Cemetery Monument in particular illustrates Coaker's lasting prominence and esteem in the community, region and province. The scale, design and placement of the cemetery is remarkable in outport Newfoundland.

Privately built homes in historic Port Union offer a unique insight into the evolution of outport building styles during the first half of the twentieth century, from typical two storey box houses to bungalows that later gained popularity.

Throughout historic Port Union there are boarded up FPU buildings. All except three staff houses are vacant. There has been relatively little vandalism and most buildings remain in a fairly stable state. The duplexes on Coaker Drive and bungalows on Bungalow Hill are perhaps in the worst shape in terms of structural soundness. Although the sense of place is somewhat marred by the abandoned, boarded up buildings throughout the community, Port Union retains a unique sense of history despite this. This history is visible on the cultural landscape, in buildings, monuments, ruins and natural features.

Conclusion

Port Union is the only town in Canada founded by a union, making it unique in the social and commercial history of 20th century Canada. It presents a mixture of a typical Newfoundland outport and a Canadian-style industry town. Port Union's planned layout is different from that of spontaneously settled outports while its funding and governance were comparable to that of company towns. Outports were not planned, were settled over centuries and contained few duplexes or large industrial and commercial buildings. In this sense, the layout and scale of Port Union is more typical of a company town. Socially, Port Union differed from other outports in that its residents were dependant on a union for housing, services, recreation and income. The governance and economy of Port Union was controlled mainly from the inside with little government input, similar to single industry towns of the period between 1900 and 1920.

Port Union stands as a reminder not only of the FPU, but of Canadian labour and union history as well. With its commercial and industrial district at its entrance and residential space at the edges, it is a physical manifestation of the FPU 's organizational, commercial, political and social goals. Port Union is Coaker's vision in wood with physical representations of the scale, scope and variety of FPU activities.

The architectural and cultural integrity of Port Union lies in the readability of its original plan and the survival of buildings with few changes in form and function. Even with the decay of buildings, the town has a unique atmosphere in the context of rural Newfoundland. It is a 20th century outport settled by design not by chance. Its architecture is reflective of typical outport vernacular style but on a grand scale. The Union origins of Port Union are embodied in the site, setting, vernacular architecture and plan, which together convey a strong sense of place and history, still readily identifiable with a minimum of intrusive elements.