

Connecting the Continents: The Transatlantic Park in Heart's Content, Newfoundland

Rachael Fitkowski, *APALA, BLA*

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The town of Heart's Content, Newfoundland is home to the Heart's Content Cable Station. At one point in time, it was a bustling hub for communications, as it was the landing site of the first telegraphic cable that crossed the Atlantic Ocean. In advance of the 150th anniversary of the cable landing, a team of landscape architects were tasked with creating a design for the green space that surrounded the landing site. The intent of the design was to create an engaging space that was inviting to visitors, while also showcasing the some of the history of telegraphic communication in Newfoundland.

Over the past few years, people around the world have caught glimpses into Newfoundland and Labrador, due to the wildly successful and far-reaching provincial tourism advertisements. They seem to pop up everywhere; from television, to social media, and even on airlines. You've probably seen at least one their campaigns; which highlight many different aspects of the province, including the natural beauty, the people, and cultural events and activities. Tourism is a large driver of the provincial economy, and these advertisements do their part to help to bring people out to the eastern edge of Canada and North America. Once here, visitors take many different paths. Some choose to explore the liveliness of St. John's, while others veer off the beaten path and head for the peace of the outport communities, and some even venture as far away as Labrador. Chances are though, wherever they end up, they are never too far from a Provincial Historic Site.

Provincial Historic Sites is a division of the Department of Culture, Tourism, Industry, and Innovation. They are tasked with the protection and preservation of approximately 10 sites throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. All these sites have been designated as Provincial Historic Sites under the Historic Resources Act, an act respecting the preservation of the province's historic resources. In order to be designated, a site must have historical and

architectural significance. Provincial Historic Sites preserves and protects these designated sites, all the while interpreting the site's stories to locals and visitors alike.

One of the sites in their care is the Heart's Content Cable Station in Heart's Content, Newfoundland. What is now a small town about 1.5 hours from St. John's, used to be a bustling community, and home to some of the most cutting-edge communications technology of its time; the Transatlantic Telegraph Cable.

The Transatlantic Telegraph Cable was a telegraph cable that spanned the ocean floor from Ireland to Newfoundland, to help improve communications between Europe and North America in the 1800s. Prior to the cable, communication between Europe and North America took place by ship. Messages that had to travel across the ocean could take weeks or even longer in the case of bad weather. The cable allowed a message and response in the same day, which turned trans-Atlantic communication on its head.

Although the cable was ultimately a huge success, the road to completion was not an easy one. In the end, it took many attempts before the system was deemed operational. For the first attempt in 1857, a ship left Ireland and headed towards North America, but the cable broke before it got very far. After being abandoned for a year, a second attempt took place in 1858, when two ships met in the middle of the ocean to splice their cables, and then headed respectively to Newfoundland and Ireland. After many breaks in the cable, this attempt was also unsuccessful. Finally, on the third attempt, the cable was landed on both islands without any breaks. Excitement boomed on both sides of the Atlantic, as the inaugural messages were sent across the cable. This enthusiasm was short-lived though, as the cable failed only 3 weeks later. The public lost confidence in the system, and the project was put on hold until 1865.

Once enough money and interest were raised to try again, another attempt occurred in 1865, which resulted with another broken cable. The last attempt that was finally successful occurred in July 1866. The SS Great Eastern left Valentia, Ireland and sailed into Heart's Content, Newfoundland to land the cable. At the same time, they also retrieved and repaired the lost cable

from 1865, resulting in two operational cables. The SS Great Eastern was a massive ship for its time, and Heart's Content was chosen as the landing point due to its deep, wide, and protected harbour.

To say that the landing of the cable was an example of hard work and determination is an understatement. But in the end, the work paid off, and the Heart's Content Cable Station was in operation for almost 100 years. By 1965, telegraph communication had started to become obsolete, and the cable station was decommissioned. Over its almost 100-year life span, the cable station brought a lot of life to the small town of Heart's Content. The Transatlantic Telegraph Cable put Heart's Content on the map. Compared to other outport towns in Newfoundland at the same time, Heart's Content was booming. The cable company made great investments in the station and the community, including housing, activity centres, and even a central town water system, the first of its kind outside of the major centres.

In 1968, the cable station was purchased by Provincial Historic Sites, and eventually became a communications museum. With the 150th anniversary of the cable landing approaching in 2016, staff decided to renovate the museum's interpretation, to make it more modern and engaging for visitors, prior to the influx of people that they were expecting for this event. They also wanted to improve the connection between the building and the cable itself, by creating the "Transatlantic Park".

The Heart's Content Cable Station sits on Highway 80, and the building and cable landing site are separated by the road. The cable site is a small piece of land located on prime waterfront property and sits adjacent to a small town-owned park. Even though the views of the harbour would be enough to make most people pull over, staff found that the lacklustre landscape was not doing a great job of drawing visitors to the cable. Two monuments existed on site but were laid out in a disorganized manner; and one was even unsafe to read, as visitors would have to stand on the shoulder of the road to view it. The goal for the design team was to redesign the

space, making it intriguing and eye-catching to visitors, while still being informative of the site's momentous history.

Relocating the two monuments was a key part of the final design. Moving the large granite monument to a safer location closer to shore gave it a better presence on the site; as it stood out against the harbour behind it. It became a focal point on the site, able to draw visitors closer to the cable. A small plaza was created adjacent to the monument and became a place where visitors could sit down and enjoy the view of the harbour. This space also doubled as a gathering area for any activities run by the museum staff and had a designated space for the second smaller monument. Surrounding the plaza with hardy plant material helped create some shelter, while also improving the overall curb appeal of the site. The crowning jewel of the plaza was a core-ten steel band that ran diagonally through the plaza. It roughly followed the line of the cable from the cable station towards where it entered the shore and pointed further out towards the mouth of the harbour. Laser-cut from the steel is the message "Our shore end has just been laid, and a most perfect cable, under God's blessing, has completed telegraphic communication between England and the continent of America." The message is shown in English and Morse code. This was one of the first messages to be sent across the cable, and therefore is a fitting centerpiece for the Transatlantic Park. It's also another feature to help draw visitors towards the cable. As they walk along through the plaza, reading the message, they are drawn closer to the shore, where a view of the cable becomes visible.

Construction of the Transatlantic Park finished just in time for the 150th anniversary of the cable landing in July 2016. The park was packed with visitors and locals alike, and different activities took place in the space throughout the day. The park has achieved the goal of creating a more cohesive historic site, even with the road running between the cable site and the museum. Now, as visitors drive by the site, they're met with a view of a towering monument, standing out against the picturesque harbour. Once they arrive on site, they are intrigued with the message on the ground plane, and they take more time to walk around and explore.

The Transatlantic Telegraphic Cable was a huge communications success, and it has deep roots in Newfoundland. Provincial Historic Sites realized this significance and made it their goal to preserve and restore the cable station and cable landing site. With the creation of the Transatlantic Park, and the renovation of the cable station, the legacy of this historic event will now live on in Heart's Content for many more years to come.

The design team for this project consisted of Landscape Architects Timothy Murray, CSLA and Rachael Fitkowski, APALA; and construction was completed by Murray's Landscape Services.