

The Historical Use of Ochre Pigments in Newfoundland and Labrador.



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Introduction

In Newfoundland and Labrador, red ochre has been used traditionally for three main purposes: as a pigment by Indigenous groups; as a preservative for marine textiles (sails, ropes, nets); and as a pigment for the preparation of red ochre paint used extensively on outbuildings and vernacular fishing structures throughout the province. This article outlines the history of red ochre, compares the use of fish, seal, and linseed oil, and traces the development and the decline of red ochre paint.

A History of Red Ochre

The word “ochre” refers to both a natural clay earth pigment and the name of the colours produced by this pigment. In Newfoundland and Labrador, it has been spelled variously as ochre, oker, oaker, or ocher. In its mineral form, it is known as hematite, while ochre pigment is usually a mixture of clay and sand, with varying amounts of Iron(III) oxide (ferric oxide Fe_2O_3) ranging between 20% and 70%. Ochre pigment ranges in colour from yellow to deep orange or brown. Red ochre contains unhydrated hematite, whereas yellow ochre contains hydrated hematite. The reddish colour in ochre pigment can either be natural, or some yellow ochres can be transmuted into red ochres through various firing/heating processes, as described here:

Red ochre was mined directly from the earth, or it could be made by calcining yellow ochre. Much of the red ochre used during the late eighteenth century was probably made from yellow ochre rather than dug up as red ochre. Many

painters probably burned or calcined their own pigments rather than buying it already processed because they could then be sure the ochre was pure and could also make it as “light or as dark” as they desired, depending on how long they kept it exposed to the heat (Penn 11).

Anthropologist Ernst E. Wreschner (631) has stated that “prehistory has produced evidence for two meaningful regularities in human evolution: tool making and the collection and use of ochre.” He has further argued that it “is possible that the transformation of a yellow stone into a red one was viewed as magic – a view perhaps reinforced by the fact that when rubbed and brought into contact with liquid it was the color of dried blood, meat, or fruit and berries” (632). Zilhão et al. have argued that the perforated and pigment-stained marine shells found at Neandertal-associated sites in Iberia, dated to as early as approximately 50,000 years ago, show evidence of being dyed with ochre for non-functional purposes, “and suggests instead the kind of inclusion ‘for effect’ that one would expect in a cosmetic preparation” (1027).

Early artists were adept at putting the many varieties of ochre to use. As an example, the great Paleolithic paintings of Lascaux Cave near the village of Montignac, France, were created using twelve different pigments. These ranged in hue from pale yellow to black and were mixed with naturally high calcium content cave water to ensure good adhesion and great durability (see Leroi-Gourhan). Similar ochre pigments were much prized in antiquity. Classical literature presents a wealth of information regarding the nature, properties, and wide range of applications for the prized and often hematite-based red pigment known as *miltos*, including its applications in shipbuilding, carpentry, and medicine (Photos-Jones 359). Greek philosopher Theophrastus noted the difference between artificial and natural *miltos*, writing:

The invention belongs to Cydias, who is said to have grasped it through noticing that, when a general stores was destroyed by fire, half-burnt ochre had turned crimson. New pots luted with clay are placed in a furnace. When the pots are thoroughly exposed to the fire, they cause the ochre to be baked, and the more they are burnt the darker and more glowing the ochre becomes (*qtd* in Photos-Jones 361).

Red ochre was used as a paint pigment or colourant in everything from Roman wall plasterwork (Bugini *et al.*), to early Irish Medieval wall-paintings (McGrath), to the 18th-century work-in-oils of English portrait artist Thomas Bardwell (Talley and Groen). As long as humans have been painting things, red ochre has been one of the ingredients in the artisan’s toolbox.

Indigenous Use of Ochre

The Beothuk were an Indigenous people living on the island of Newfoundland prior to European settlement. Due to a number of circumstances including European hostilities, diseases, colonial expansion, and a loss of resources, the population died out in the 1800s. Anthropologist Dr. Donald H Holly (89–90), notes that the Indigenous group was also known as “Red Indians” due to their use of red ochre:

Perhaps most importantly, they smeared red ochre over these implements, their clothing and their bodies – everything Beothuk. The importance of red ochre to the Beothuk is obvious. Before the Beothuk were known to the anthropological community as the Beothuk they were simply the Red Indians.

Ochre served a variety of purposes for pre-contact and contact period Indigenous groups in Newfoundland and in Labrador. Red ochre was possibly used by pre-contact ancestors of the Beothuk as body paint (Holly et al. 78), and was used by the Beothuk for burials, as well as on bodies, bows, arrows, canoe rests, and canoes (Jenkinson and Loring 94) or even as a bug or insect deterrent (Fleming 69)¹. The Beothuk may have also used yellow ochre to colour their hair (Gilbert 2009 61).

Ochre As Preservative

European settlers used red ochre as a combination of preservative and colour pigment. One use was for “barking” or “bark tanning” nets, sails, and fishing gear to preserve it. The exact mixture of materials used to tan sails varied over time and from community to community, and it could contain some magical combination of ingredients including red ochre, cod oil, urine, seawater, beeswax, and/or birchbark extracts. The combination of ochre and oil adds to the weight of the canvas, but, “sails dressed by this method are durable, supple, and waterproof so that they do not become stiff and heavy in wet weather” (Worth para. 8).

As another option, sailworkers could use what was known as “cutch” – a type of tree bark extract which was imported to Newfoundland and Labrador from the Victorian period onward. *McAlpine's Newfoundland Directory* for 1894 to 1897 (151) references St. John's merchant John Steer as a dealer in “Pitch, Tar Oakum, Resin Cutch, Lime, and Ochre.” Merchant Colin Campbell of St. John's advertised in the April edition of the *Evening Telegram* in 1908 that he was wholesaling “Fisher-Lad” brand cutch,

¹ Ochre could also have been used as an insect repellent as far back as the Middle Stone Age, in Namibia (see Rifkin), and also as a form of sunblock (see Rifkin et al.).

available in both blocks and slabs, “pure and unadulterated” which had recently arrived via the steamship *Carthaginian*.

Where commercial cutch was not available, fishermen made do with what they had, and that usually meant oil and ochre. As Francis Reardon notes,

The other thing that ochre was also used for, it was mixed with seal’s oil and used to put on the sails. It gave the sails on the schooners this really bright red colouring as opposed to now of course the white sails. But years ago when they were using the canvas sails they were red. Red ochre was a preservative, and also seal’s oil gave the sail a bit of a glaze so there was less friction in the wind, and it kept the sail from holding water. The water beaded away from it.

Doctor and a naturalist Charles Wendell Townsend spent May–June 1909 sailing along the Labrador coast. In his book *A Labrador Spring* he notes several examples of these ochre-stained sails. Upon visiting the community of Esquimaux Point (likely Havre-Saint-Pierre along the Lower North Shore of Quebec) he noted the local two-masted schooners, describing them as picturesque, “especially when the sails were dyed a light pink or terra cotta red to preserve them from the weather” (Townsend 72–73). Further along the coast, he remarks about the boat he sailed upon:

It was schooner-rigged with two masts, and, although the owners took great pride in the white sails, and said the boat could therefore sail the faster, I myself regretted that the sails were not stained a picturesque red, or pink, or brown, as were those of many other barges in this region. Some of these stains were wonderful bits of colour, shading like a water-colour wash from dark mahogany in one part of the sail, to a light pinkish hue in another part. Others were more uniform, but the effect was always pleasing and suggestive of the colouring of the sails in far less rugged and more smiling waters (Townsend 105).

Ochre as Pigment

The primary use of red ochre by settlers was as a paint or stain colourant. One small example of its use as a colourant can be found in the Dictionary of Newfoundland English, which includes the compound word “ochre-box” meaning a “container in which ochre and water are mixed and a length of string dipped to mark timber for sawing,” also called a reddening box (Story et al. 355). In July 1964, Dorman Miles of Herring Neck described the use of such a box for researchers John Widdowson and Fred Earle:

They'd have the reddin' lines, the used to call it. They used to strike the [log] with a marking line, with red ochre on it. That would leave the mark on the log where he wanted to come along and saw (Story et al. 408).

In July 1967, Raymond Morey, a resident of La Scie, described the box for the same researchers:

A red'ning box, you know, but some people call it a ochre box. This is a old red'ning line I was telling about lining the sticks. You use ochre in there and a drop of water (Story et al. 408).

By far, however, ochre was most often used by the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century in the painting of outbuildings: stages, stores, barns, stables, outhouses and the like. This is part of an exceptionally long tradition, with the painting of buildings with red ochre established in Europe at least by the 16th century. One of Newfoundland's oldest English archaeological sites, the 1610 John Guy colony at Cupids, Conception Bay, shows evidence of red ochre paint being used:

Another feature... recovered from Operation 41 deserve special mention. In the northwest corner of the operation, roughly four metres east of the storehouse and directly above the sterile subsoil, we uncovered a concentration of red ochre paint measuring about one metre across and several centimetres thick. Small deposits of red ochre paint have been found elsewhere on the site but this is by far the largest yet uncovered. The fact that it is directly above sterile indicates that it was deposited early in the occupation of the site and the large quantity suggests that a container of some type was probably tipped over. Obviously, sometime early in the history of the site someone was painting something with red ochre paint – most likely the dwelling house, storehouse, and other related buildings (Gilbert 2006).

English geologist and surveyor Joseph Beete Jukes remarked upon his 1839 expedition that “the first thing that strikes a stranger on entering a harbour in Newfoundland is the abundance of what are called the fish-flakes and stages together with the wooden wharfs and the great dark red storehouses” (Jukes 222).

In addition to covering those dark red storehouses, ochre paint was also used in the painting of wooden trim work and window sashes, often to provide a contrasting paint scheme for residential buildings. In addition to being used on the facades of outbuildings (or occasionally on the water-facing or less public side of houses) red ochre was sometimes used instead of the more traditional lime whitewash to paint fences. A humorous article from 1895 St. John's demonstrates this use:

Not Allowed to Paint the Town Red. — Mr. J. S. Pitts has a large new board fence at his central water-side premises. He had a man applying red ochre to it. As the man applied it, a youth, one of those smart, aggravating ones, happened along and said: “Skipper, don't do that! You are not allowed to do it.” “Get away! Don't do what?: said the wielder of the brush. “Why, paint the town red” said the youngster “it is not allowed. Mind, there is a policeman watching you. He will arrest you.” The painter pitched the brush, but the boy dodged it, and the work went on. Now all is red (Not 4).

All was not always red, however. Fogo Island resident Ted Burke notes that the architectural choice of red ochre paint, often with white trim, was an aesthetic choice over yellow ochre. He says,

We'd coat them wood shingles; we'd render out the oil, the liver, fish liver, and we'd get about 15 or 20 pound of ochre, and boil it for a couple of days in a drum, and heave in about a half a gallon of red paint and let it boil and stir it. The same thing applies to my stable out there. You'll still get the ochre. You get your red ochre and your cod oil, my son, I guarantee it. It'll go right through the clapboard. My son, our premises, our stable and our stages now, I guarantee you we kept them up, with the red ochre and the white trimmings, they used to be worth looking at. Guarantee you, worth looking at! I liked the red, we used to go in for the red, the windows and all that. We used to have that red you see, and the clapboard white. Now Alonze's, his house was painted yellow, you see, and he had the white trim; it didn't show up like the red, see? I didn't fancy it. 'Twas what they used to call this buff paint, 'twas right yellow, you see, and he used to have the white trim, and 'twas nearly all the one colour, only a little difference. But the red and the white, boy, it really showed (*qtd* in Mellin 2000 58).

In some parts of Canada, yellow ochre was a preferred choice for interior flooring. It was noted in 1885, for example, that in the Upper Canada of the 1830s, “carpets were seldom seen. The floors of the spare rooms, as they were called, were painted almost invariably with yellow ochre paint” (Haight 94).

In addition to red and yellow, other colour variations were available. One of the colours used in Newfoundland was Spanish Brown, which had been in use in North America as paint colourant since at least the late 1700s. Spanish Brown was described as:

... a coarse native ochre. It was nearly the same color as Venetian red, “but fouler.” It occurred in deposits in several parts of England, although at one time it was probably imported. The only preparation it received was freeing it from the “stones and filth” that were dug up with it. Spanish brown was chiefly used for grounds and primings for coarse work by house-painters (Penn 11).

In December of 1851, the *Morning Courier* newspaper out of St. John’s noted that merchant David Steele was selling a variety of items. Alongside his offerings of pimento peppers, ice towlines, and Copenhagen frocks, he also stocked Spanish Brown, Red Ochre, Red Lead, boiled and raw linseed oil, and 110 kegs of assorted paint (By David 3).

Francis “Frank” Reardon remembers three varieties of ochre being used on the Great Northern Peninsula up to the mid twentieth-century: red, yellow, and brown.

There was a yellow ochre which is what they call limonite and that was sort of a hydrated iron oxide. It contained a certain amount of iron and oxygen. The red ochre that we used wasn’t a hydrous iron oxide which meant that it contained no water and was powdery. It was ground up. The brown ochre was partially hydrated and it contained goethite and you’ll find that in soil and especially low temperature environments. That is the one that is normally found in cave paintings. But the one we used predominantly was the red ochre and the colour variations was dependant on whether they were using cod oil, seal’s oil, or linseed oil and how much of the ochre they put in.

Deposits of ochre are found throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, notably near Fortune Harbour and at Ochre Pit Cove (Ochre 148) and along the Shanapeushipis River in Labrador (Jenkinson and Ashini 100–101), but the majority of red ochre used for paint in the post-contact period was imported.

Ochre was available through a number of merchant firms in Newfoundland and Labrador. One of the earliest local print advertisements for red ochre is from an 1843 edition of *The Star And Newfoundland Advocate*. In it, W & H Thomas and Co. advertises “Paints, Red Ochre, and Whiting, Bright and Black Varnish” (W & H 3).

While P. and L. Tessier were selling pre-mixed kegs of red oxide and red ochre paint in 1890 (Paints and Oils 2), most ochre seems to have been imported and sold in a dry, powdered form. John Quinton Limited, Gerald Quinton’s family’s business in Bonavista Bay, bought it from the firm of Harris & Hiscock in St. John’s, while others

imported it directly from England where it was produced. Francis Reardon remembers that for the Northern Peninsula,

The ochre we used came from a place called Brixham in England and that was brought over as a ground ochre. They mined it there. It was ground, and then it was compacted into blocks. I can still remember taking them; my father would take them and break them apart and stir it up a bit first and then start adding the seal's oil to it until he got the colour, the shading that he wanted.

Brixham, a small fishing town in the district of Torbay in the county of Devon, on the south-west of England, was home to the Sharkham Point Iron Mine. The mine may have been in operation as early as 1790 and was worked for around 125 years, employing at its peak 100 workers (Popham). The mine produced ore and ochre for export, and also provided ochre for a local business, the Torbay Paint Company².

In the 1862 catalogue of the International Exhibition, a whole page is given over to a miraculous rust proofing paint that had been invented in 1849 by John Rendall in Brixham and manufactured by Richard Wolston under the banner of 'The Torbay Paint Company Ltd'.... Torbay Paint was used on both iron and wooden structures. It was reported to give a greater coverage than conventional lead based paint, was also resistant to weather, chemicals and heat, would prevent further corrosion of already rusty iron work and retained its finish longer than other paints (Popham).

Among its many uses, the Brixham ochre-based paint was recommended to professional gardeners in nineteenth-century Devon:

For maintenance, it was recommended that greenhouses be painted with lead-free oxide paint from the Torbay Paint Company. It was reputedly without fumes that could be fatal to plants, had good coverage and, supposedly, lasted three times as long as lead paint. For the discerning, it came in seventy different shades and colours (Greener 46).

The *Mercantile Navy List for 1899*, housed at the Maritime History Archive of Memorial University, includes an advertisement for this particular paint. The ad reads:

² The Torbay Paint Company site in Brixham "also functioned as a 'barking yard', where ochre that had been boiled with oak bark (hence the term) and wood tar was painted onto sails as a preservative. This had the aesthetic quality of giving the sails their magnificent red colours" (Popham).

PAINTS – Torbay Paint. Torbay Paint Co., 26–28 Billiter Street, London, E.C.; and Brixham, Torbay. (Registered Trade Marks “Wolston” and “Calley’s Torbay.”) It is to the interest of the consumer to use a preservative, lasting, and large covering paint like “Torbay Paint,” instead of inferior paints which require constant renewal.

Most ochre paint in Newfoundland and Labrador seems to have been hand-mixed locally rather than imported in a finished form such as Torbay Paint. Once powdered ochre was purchased, it was cold-mixed by the painter or property owner with some type of oil. This could have been commercially-purchased linseed oil, or locally-produced seal or cod liver oil. When nothing else was available, even things like kerosene or diesel oil could be used as the paint base. In a 2006 interview, Gerald Quinton of Red Cliffe, Bonavista Bay, remembered,

You’d get some kind of container, hey? A big container, and twenty pounds of ochre to a gallon of seal oil. That’s the mixture. Twenty pounds of ochre to one gallon of seal oil³. And you’d mix it one year and use it the next. You’d use, like, a wooden paddle for stirring it, every now and then, something wide like a paddle, wooden for stirring it. You’d keep stirring it every now and then, probably twice a month or something like that. And you’d use it the next year then. But if you found it too thick, then, you’d thin it down a little with a little seal oil, if you found it too heavy to put on with a brush. It’d give you a heavy coat, a good coat, then. You wouldn’t have to do it twice, just the one coat is sufficient. So, it’s a good coat. Not much smell from it, seal oil. No, not much smell at all. Just a little while you’re stirring is all. It’s a good coat, b’y. Yeah, that’s right.

Reardon also remembers using seal oil as the base:

You would take the gallon or two of seal’s oil or whatever and you keep mixing the powdered ochre into it until you got sort of a stain that you could see the wood grain through or if you wanted it opaque you kept adding more to it until you got the right spreading texture. You didn’t want it too runny and you didn’t want it to go too thick either because the ochre would thicken it up as you added to it. It was similar I guess to making the thickening for gravy.

The type of oil used would have had an impact on the final colour of the paint. While the Quinton family primarily used seal oil as their base to give the deeper red colour they preferred, they also used cod liver oil. Quinton remembers the cod oil thusly:

³ Mr. Quinton’s mixture works out to roughly 9 kilograms of ochre for every 4.6 litres of oil.

We'd mix it instead of seal oil, some people used it. But it's not as good. No, it wouldn't stay on as long. And it turned foxy, a different colour. It wouldn't be a pure red with the cod oil. No, a different colour altogether. Not as good. Not a bright red, it wouldn't be red at all. More of a brown, like.

Quinton also spoke highly of the durability of the oil/ochre mix: a building he had painted with oil and ochre in 1994 was still fresh-looking in 2006, and he suggested that a good coat of red ochre paint could last twenty-five or thirty years.

Use of Fish Oils as Paint Base

The use of fish oil as paint base has a long history in colonial North America. One excellent, and fairly detailed, description of this practise is a "Memorandum of an Agreement" made the 30 August 1798, between St. George Tucker and Jeremiah Satterwhite, both of Williamsburg, Virginia. The memorandum reads,

The said Jeremiah Satterwhite agrees & undertakes to paint the Outside of the dwelling house, & part of the inside, together With the Kitchen & Dairy, belonging to the said St George Tucker in the City of Williamsburg, as herein after mentioned, & in the most compleat, & workmanlike manner; taking Care never to paint but in dry Weather, nor at any time when the part to be painted is not perfectly dry. The tops of the House, Kitchen & dairy are to be painted with Fish-oil mixt in the paint⁴, the oil to be well boiled before it is mixed with the Paint. St George Tucker hath imported boiled Linseed Oil, but if it should not be sufficiently boiled, it is to be boiled to a proper Consistency. Every part that is to be painted is to have two good Coats well laid on, in the best Manner. St George Tucker hath provided about 240-pounds of best white Lead; half an hundred weight of Spanish brown; and the like Quantity of yellow Ochre, all ground in oil, and about sixteen Gallons of boiled Linseed Oil; he is further to provide as much fish-oil as will be sufficient to paint the roofs, & sheds, as hereafter mentioned....

The top of the Kitchen, and of the shed leading from the Cellar to the Kitchen yard, are to be painted with Spanish brown, mixed with Tar, & fish oil, & well boiled together. The sides of the Kitchen of yellow Ochre, with a very small mixture of White Lead: the window frames & Sashes of straw-colour, or white: the sliders to the windows in Imitation of the Sashes. (qtd in Peterson 34).

⁴ Grant Tucker remembers, "I understood from Uncle Ernest Green, born about 1880, that the wood shingles covering the roofs of houses were coated with cod liver oil twice yearly; he made no mention of ochre on the roofs of houses but ochre was certainly applied to shingles that were used as siding."

Three distinct classes of oil were recognized in the 1750–1850 period: animal oil, generally obtained from the fatty tissues of animals; mineral oil; and vegetable oil (Penn 20).

Fish oil was the only one derived from the animal kingdom that played a significant role in the finishing trades. It was not a satisfactory binding medium for paints, as it dried too slowly and tended to become rancid when exposed to the air for any period of time (Penn 20).

Somewhat contrary to this statement is an article published in the 1805 transactions of “The Society, Instituted at London, for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce.” That year, they voted to award their Silver Medal and the sum of twenty guineas to Mr. Thomas Vanherman, of No. 21, Marylebone Street, for his “Processes of Cheap and Durable Paints with Fish–Oil.”

Vanherman gives incredibly detailed instructions for the production of various paints using whale and fish oils, and specifications for colours including Subdued Green, Bright Green, Stone Colour, and Bright Red, with notes on achieving different colour gradations within those colours. He also includes a testimonial from Mr. Hill, West Lavant, Sussex, builder, and surveyor to his Grace the Duke of Richmond:

The fish–oil composition you made use of, in all the painting you have done at Earl’s Court, Kensington, for his Grace the Duke of Richmond, under my superintendence, in 1802–03, was fully equal, if not superior to any painting done in the usual way with linseed–oil, white–lead, &c. I have also the highest opinion of your coarse composition and fish–oil you made use of on the out–buildings, fences, &c on the above premises; the great body and hard surface it holds out, must be of the greatest preservation to all timbers and fences, exposed to open air, and all weathers. It must also be of the greatest service on plastery stucco, external walls, &c (Vanherman 206–207).

Attempts were made to use fish oils in paints as a linseed oil substitute during the first years of the nineteenth century (Penn 20). This persisted well into the twentieth century. “The use of fish oil in the paint industry has been for a number of years an accomplished fact,” boasted the *Scientific American* in 1917 (Hendrick 489). In the 1920s, sea captain Robert Fergusson was said to have noticed the preservative qualities of fish oil: “when he noticed that an accidental splash of fish oil had stopped the relentless spread of corrosion on his rusty metal deck, he immediately recognized it for what it was: a valuable solution,” and he went on to found the company known as Rust–Oleum (Rust–Oleum para. 1).

Architect Robert Mellin has written on the use and properties of the red ochre/cod-liver oil mix in the community of Tilting on Fogo Island. He writes;

In the past the fronts of houses were painted with high-gloss, oil-based paint, similar to the paint used on wooden boats, provided the homeowner could afford to purchase paint. The sides, the back of the house, and the back kitchen were painted with a mixture of ochre and cod-liver oil if there was a need to economize. Outbuildings were always painted with red ochre. Oil-based paint trapped moisture, causing the paint to peel and flake off. Acting like a vapor barrier on the exterior of the wall, it accelerated the decay of wooden cladding components. Oil-based paint needed to be scraped down and repainted at least every four years or so. Ochre was more forgiving. It acted more like a diluted stain, and although it would weather, it was permeable (Mellin 2006 20).

Use of Linseed Oil as Paint Base

Linseed oil has long been used as a quick-drying base for paints: “Of the drying oils, linseed oil was undoubtedly used the most. In spite of its faults, it was satisfactory for the majority of uses, plentiful, and inexpensive” (Penn 20). Its natural brown hue favoured dark pigments like red or brown ochres, or other dark shades; in 1814 a William Parker, of Whitechapel, Middlesex, an “Oil and Colourman” was granted a patent for improvements to the manufacturing of a chrome green linseed-oil based paint (Specification 44).

Local merchants were quick to stock linseed oil in various forms, which was used for making ochre paints (or sometimes for mixing with more readily available fish oils as a base), but which also had other applications such as woodworking, oilcloth making, or even for medicinal preparations. A May 1890 advertisement in *The Colonist* noted that M & J Tobin, at the Beach, Duckworth Street, was selling both ochre and linseed oil in casks and drums, of 1, 2, 5 and 10 gallons each, along with 2000 small cans of mixed paints in various colours (To Painters 1). An April 1896 advertisements section of the *Evening Telegram* included multiple merchants offering linseed oil: Paterson, Downing & Co. had fifty barrels apiece of both raw and boiled linseed oil; J.H. Martin & Co. also offered raw and boiled linseed, along with Brandram’s and Hubbock’s White Leads, oxides and paints in various colours, “marbeline,” varnishes, and a selection of paint and whitewash brushes (New 9).

Where it was available, or when they could afford it, some people used linseed oil instead of (or in addition to) animal-based oils. Grant Tucker of Winterton (formerly of Hants Harbour) remembers using both linseed oil and cod liver oil:

I recall I had to go down to Janes's (P. Janes and Sons) and buy some ochre powder. It was in a little bin, and they had a scoop that you would scoop it out and weight off. Then we had to get some linseed oil. Now before the linseed oil of course they used cod liver oil. I have a recollection of the use of cod liver oil but I can't really be specific about it. I do recall seeing it used. But this linseed oil was mixed with the powder and then you would apply it to the fishing store. When you mixed it, of course, you could have it pasty or you could have it a little bit runny. You had to mix it with the right proportion of oil, and of course we were guided in doing that by my uncles. You would use a brush. Now, I recall the brush being a little big, hardly like a paintbrush, but more like a lime brush⁵. That would have been a wider brush, with longer bristles in it. I recall in applying it you had to sort of scrub because it was like a stain, it sort of penetrated the wood.

Decline of Red Ochre Paints

By the early twentieth century, alternatives to home-mixed ochre paints were already commercially available. Some of these were variations on old techniques, while others represented new innovations in paint technologies. Again, local merchants were quick to capitalize on these new products. St. John's merchant Colin Campbell advertized "Prince's Metallic Paint" in 1915:

Cheaper Than Red Ochre! I have it in 100 lb. kegs and barrels of 300 lbs. It combines perfectly with linseed oil and makes a durable covering for both metal and wood. Exposure to the weather doesn't fade it. It will stay on as long as the oil lasts. It mixes readily with oil and won't settle in the pot. Ask for book of Directions (Prince's 10).

The heyday of red ochre paint had passed by the end of the 1950s, as painters preferred to use pre-mixed paints which were less labour intensive. Gerald Quinton's recipe for traditional ochre paint required it to be made in the fall, and then aged over winter for use the following spring. He also noted another downside to the red ochre and seal oil paint, saying "there was no way to get it off their clothes! You had to burn it all!" Grant Tucker remembers other reasons people shifted away from the traditional recipes, noting "the ochre took a long time to dry and, not only was the smell somewhat offensive, it attracted flies which would cover the building for a time."

⁵ Compare with this line from Farley Mowat's 1969 (115) novel *The Boat Who Wouldn't Float*: "Pails of scalding cutch were poured on the canvas and the liquid was vigorously scrubbed in with birch brooms."

Some, like Quinton, continued to use red ochre paint into the 1980s, but by then, it had become increasingly rare. Pre-mixed oil paints, often produced by the Matchless Paint Factory in St. John's, became the standard.

By this time, even as the old tradition faded, the appearance of red outbuilding had become somewhat iconic. After the use of ochre paint declined, many stages, stores, and vernacular buildings continued to be painted a red ochre colour utilizing modern paints.

A typical expression of this is to be found with the MacInnis family stage in Quidi Vidi, St. John's. The current stage is possibly the fourth belonging to the family on the same site, and was constructed by Danny MacInnis in 2010 as an expanded version of his late father Archibald's old stage.

Danny included the access door on the second floor and used a red paint to resemble the original ochre. He expressed, "I built it the best I could, to resemble the way it was. If my dad were alive today, he'd be proud of me." When asked why he bothered to rebuild, Danny responded, "Heritage and memory and to pass it on to my daughter. So that someday she can bring her kids and say your grandfather built this" (Blythe 45).

And so ochre has become an element of nostalgia, replaced as a construction material by newer products. But while the newer paints are easier and quicker, they are not necessarily better. The old natural oil and pigment paints were believed to have preservative qualities and weathering abilities that outshine modern paints. Today, with an interest in greener technologies on the rise, perhaps there is an opportunity for a re-investment in this ancient traditional practice.

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