

The Northern Bight Railway Quarry

An essential part of the construction of the Newfoundland Railway

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The construction of the Newfoundland Railway (the "Newie") required an immense amount of high-quality stone to create a permanent, durable corridor through one of the most rugged landscapes in North America. While much of the railway was built on a budget, the use of local quarries was a strategic engineering decision led by the contractor **Robert G. Reid**, a Scotsman who was himself a trained stonemason.

The Rationale: Why Quarries?

Building with stone was significantly more expensive and labour-intensive than using timber, but it was deemed essential for several reasons:

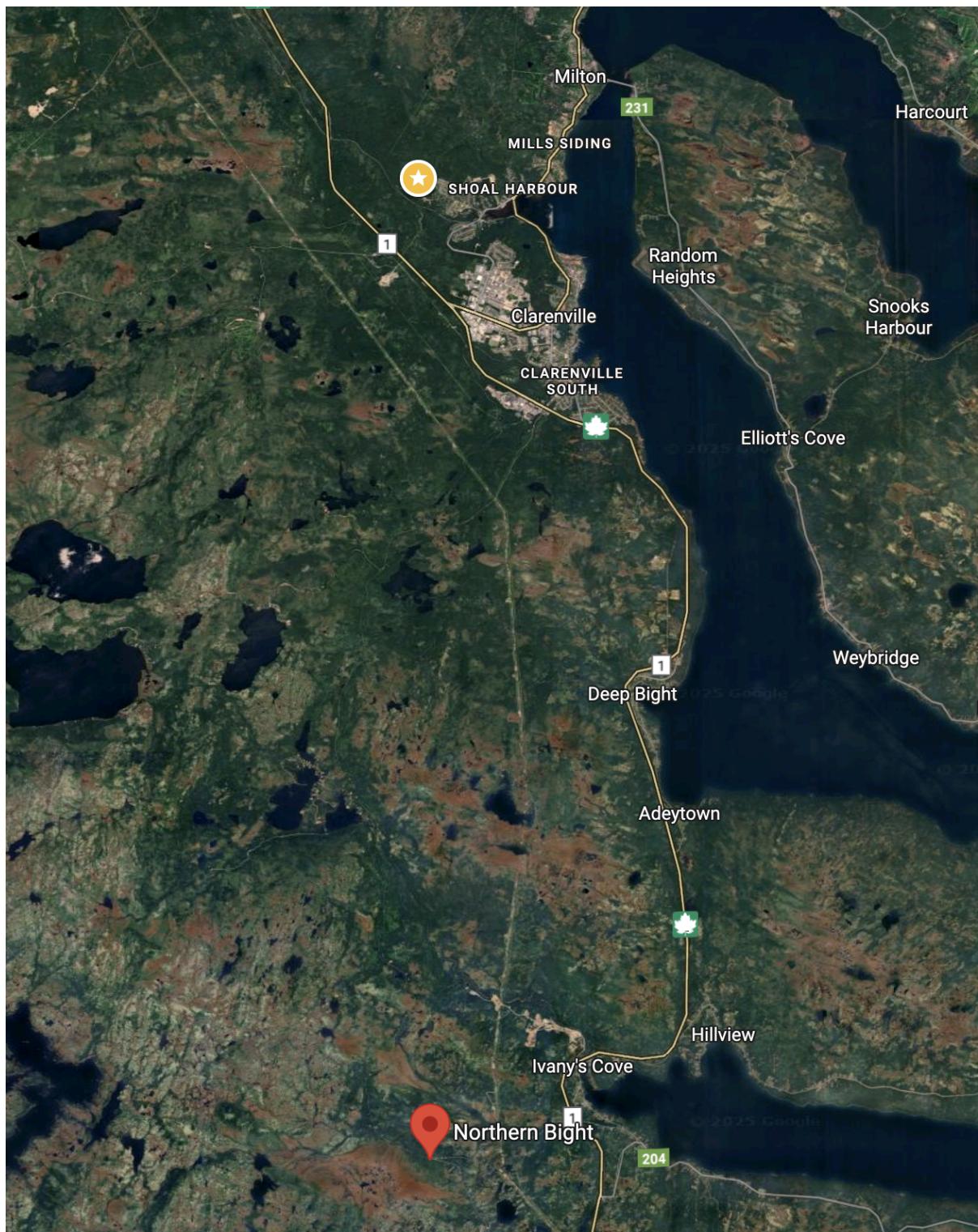
- **Resistance to "Ice Runs":** Newfoundland's rivers experience violent ice breakups in the spring. Wooden bridge pilings would be snapped like toothpicks by the moving ice. Massive granite abutments, like those cut from **Northern Bight**, were heavy enough to withstand these forces.
- **Preventing Rot:** The island's damp, salt-laden air causes timber to rot rapidly. For a "trans-island" line intended to last generations, stone foundations for bridges and culverts were the only way to ensure the track wouldn't sink or collapse.
- **Fire Safety:** Steam locomotives were notorious for throwing sparks. A wooden bridge was a fire hazard in the middle of a remote forest; stone was fireproof.
- **Ballast and Grades:** To keep the narrow-gauge tracks level over "muskeg" (boggy ground), millions of tons of crushed rock were needed as ballast to provide drainage and a stable base.

The "Big Three" Railway Quarries

While many small "borrow pits" were dug along the line for gravel, the Reid Newfoundland Company operated three primary industrial quarries for high-grade **dimension stone** (large, precisely cut blocks):

Quarry Location	Stone Type	Primary Use

Northern Bight	Precambrian Red Granite	Bridge abutments, foundations, and culverts on the eastern section.
Benton	Pink Granite / Gneiss	Infrastructure for the central section (near Gander Lake).
The Quarry (Gaff Topsails)	Yellow & Green Granite	The "crown jewel" quarry. Used for the St. John's Railway Station and major mountain trestles.





The Northern Bight Quarry near Clarenville

The history of the quarry at **Northern Bight** is a story of grit, engineering necessity, and the "Red Granite" that quite literally holds up the Newfoundland Railway. While often overshadowed in popular memory by the massive quarry at the Gaff Topsails, Northern Bight was arguably the most important source of high-quality building stone on the eastern half of the island.

1. Establishment and the "Big Cut" (Early 1890s)

The quarry was established by **Robert Gillespie Reid** and the **Reid Newfoundland Company** around **1891–1892**. As construction of the trans-island railway moved west from Whitbourne, the crews encountered the massive granite batholiths of the Isthmus.

Instead of seeing the rock solely as an obstacle, Reid—a former stonemason himself—recognized it as a superior building material. The stone here is **Swift Current Granite**, a Precambrian-aged rock known for its deep red-to-pink colour. Unlike the sedimentary rocks found closer to St. John's, this granite was "massive" (meaning it didn't have natural cracks or layers), making it perfect for **dimension stone**.

2. The Infrastructure of the Island

The primary "history" of the Northern Bight quarry is found in the bridges of Newfoundland.

- **Trestle Abutments:** Because the granite was incredibly dense and resistant to "spalling" (flaking due to ice and salt), it was used for the massive stone piers and abutments for railway bridges across the island.
- **Durability:** While many other parts of the railway were built "on the cheap" using timber, Reid insisted on granite for the major river crossings to ensure the line wouldn't be washed away during spring thaws.
- **The "Red" vs. "Yellow":** Historical records distinguish the **Northern Bight Red Granite** from the **Topsails Yellow/Green Granite**. While the Topsails stone was used for the iconic St. John's Railway Station and cobblestones, the Northern Bight stone was the "workhorse" used for heavy engineering projects.

3. Life at the Quarry

At its peak, the quarry was a hive of manual labour.

- **The Methods:** Labourers used "plug and feather" methods to split the massive blocks. You can still see these drill marks on discarded stones near the site today.
- **The Siding:** A dedicated rail siding allowed flatcars to be backed directly up to the quarry face. The stone was so heavy that special "heavy-duty" flatcars were often required to transport the blocks to construction sites as far away as the Exploits River.
- **Northern Bight Station:** The nearby community (now the Hillview area) grew around this activity. For decades, the **Stoyles family** served as the station agents at Northern Bight, overseeing the movement of freight and stone that passed through this section.

4. Legacy and the T'Railway

The quarry ceased large-scale operations once the main line and its major bridges were completed in 1898, though it was occasionally tapped for repairs or branch line construction (like the **Bonavista Branch** starting in 1909).

Today, the site is a landmark for hikers and ATV riders on the T'Railway:

- **The "Scar":** The high, vertical rock walls of the quarry are still clearly visible just north of the former Northern Bight station site.
- **Discarded Blocks:** If you look closely at the embankments near the trail, you can find massive, perfectly rectangular blocks of red granite that were "seconds"—stones that were cut but never loaded onto a train.
- **The Bridge Piers:** Many of the original 1890s Northern Bight granite piers still stand under modern bridge decks along the trail, a testament to the stone's 130-year durability.



