



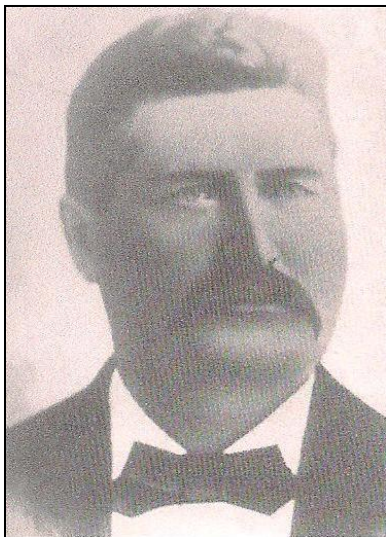
The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #18

August 2010

Over the years, Antigonish has produced many gifted young men and women who have gone on to play significant roles in our local community; others have left an impact on our province and the country; and still others have performed on the world's stage. Colin McLean of West River was one of these major players. In 1903, he founded *McLean Contracting Company* in the state of Delaware. In 2003, this very same company celebrated its 100th anniversary. Operating out of its main office in Maryland, the company employs over three hundred people today and has the reputation of being one of the "finest marine and heavy construction companies in America."

Details of his early life are a tad obscure but we do know that Colin was born in 1844, the eldest son of Donald and Anne (Chisholm) McLean. Colin was a big lad who quickly surpassed his father, "Big Donald", in stature. In adulthood, he blossomed to a height of six feet, five inches tall, weighing 345 pounds. "Big Colin" was a powerful looking man, made, according to a tribute in *The Casket* in 1916, "after the large and splendid fashion in which Scotland has a way of making men."



Local research indicates that, as a young man, Colin learned the carpenter trade. He constructed some buildings in and around Antigonish, completed the interior of St. George's Church at Georgeville in 1871, and then went on to New York City where he quickly made a name for himself as a contractor. *A History of McLean Contracting Company*, written to celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the company, paints a picture of its founder that is just a bit more colorful – one of a fourteen-year-old stowaway on a ship in Halifax Harbour, nearly a decade of life at sea, sailing the Mediterranean and around Cape Horn, and serving as first mate on a merchant ship. That he had an aptitude for hard work and making money cannot be questioned. One story is told of a ten-year-old Colin "picking up stones in the wilds of Nova Scotia in the winter time at 25 cents a day." The ground was frozen and his feet were bare – but that was how he made his first dollar. While these early stories may have been slightly exaggerated, his ambitions and successes were evidently quite real.

According to the McLean Company history, Colin's arrival in New York in the early 1870s was at a perfect time. His first job was working as a "sandhog", digging the foundations of the Brooklyn Bridge. Of course, his sheer size made him less suitable for working in tight spaces underground so he was hired on as a rigger. Within a year of moving to New York, Colin was operating as an independent sandhog contractor on the Brooklyn Bridge. Before long, as his

obituary states, he “developed into one of the largest and best-known contractors on the Atlantic sea-board.”

Antigonishers would have been quite impressed with McLean’s list of achievements, some of which were recorded in his obituary dated May of 1916. “Among his undertakings was the sea-wall around Staten Island for the Government of the United States; the piers for the second Brooklyn Bridge, one of which has its base 115 feet below sea level, and [the base for] the Statue of Liberty at the entrance of New York Harbor. All the big construction work of the Baltimore & Ohio Railway of late years was under his supervision.” No wonder Father A. A. Johnston referred to him as “one of the most prominent contractors of the United States” in his *History of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nova Scotia*.

Kennedy MacLean lists more of Colin’s achievements in his 1963 family history, *Our Ancestors*. “One of his early contracts was a section of the new Rapid Transit Sub-way under the streets of New York City. . . . He also perfected a system of economically securing and screening gravel and sand from the ocean beach. As a consequence of this scheme he established the Arundel Sand and Gravel Co. Inc., which became a most profitable industry.” According to the company history, McLean was selling paving sand to the city of Baltimore for 70 and 75cents per cubic yard in 1907.

Company history indicates that McLean successfully completed many jobs for the Long Island Railroad Company which led to contracts “for the railroad’s extensive system of piers on the East River . . . and several hotels on Long Island.” He accepted a position as superintendent of bridges with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and constructed “the elevators at Locust Point, the roundhouse, pier, machine shops and almost all of the wharves and terminal facilities in Baltimore and other ports reached by connecting lines of the B&O.” Yet, company history credits him most for his work cleaning up Johnstown, Pennsylvania, after a “devastating” flood on May 31, 1889. With the help of 3500 men, he cleaned up the wreck in a matter of six months. This work included burying over 2000 dead.

Natural disasters seemed to be his good fortune. After the great Baltimore fire of 1904, Colin McLean moved his offices to Baltimore. No doubt, “the abundance of work created by the fire must have helped McLean establish his business in Baltimore.” Soon, he made a name for himself with some big projects in the southern states – a two-mile long trestle bridge in North Carolina as well as the five-mile wooden trestle Norfolk Southern Bridge which was the “longest bridge over navigable waters at the time.” In Charleston, South Carolina, McLean constructed a five-mile long sea wall. He has even been credited with some of the sky scraper buildings of New York.

Back home in Antigonish, folks were always interested in the affairs of their native sons and daughters and *The Casket* made every effort to keep the locals in “the know.” In July of 1908, the local paper announced that Colin McLean “has been awarded the contract to rebuild the Baltimore and Ohio Pier, at Baltimore (which collapsed some time ago). Figures for the work are about \$500,000.00, on which he will, it is expected, profit to the extent of \$100,000.00.” Back then, those figures would have given Antigonishers something to talk about!

Colin had “made it big” in the United States. In forty five years, he had “constructed the most difficult and the largest structures in different cities along the Atlantic coast.” As President and General Manager of the company, he “bossed hundreds of men scattered about the country.” Financially, he was successful. From the company, he received a salary of \$10,000 per year plus expenses. Still, he didn’t forget his roots. In fact, his country residence, “one of the most imposing residences in Maryland”, was called “Antigonish”.

In his family history, Kennedy MacLean maintains that, on a visit home in 1910, Colin offered to build a bridge across the Strait of Canso for the sum of five million dollars. This asking price was, of course, totally out of the question; locals were still only making a dollar a day for ten hours of work. It wasn't until 1955 that the Canso Causeway was finally completed at the cost of about \$22 million.

In 1916, at the age of 72, Colin died, quite unexpectedly, of pneumonia. The *Baltimore Sun* headlined the announcement with "His Death Great Shock" and "Was a Builder of Big Things". The article indicated that "messages of condolence" were "received throughout the day" at his home "from men prominent in the financial, business and construction world of the city". In both business and social circles "throughout the city and State", the news of his death caused quite a stir.

Colin McLean was survived by his wife, Catherine, a daughter, Josephine, and a son, George. A twenty-year-old son, Colin, had predeceased him by seven months after a short illness from appendicitis. At the time of his death, three of Colin's brothers remained in Antigonish County: Donald at West River, John in Addington Forks, and Angus at Malignant Cove.



Even though its founder was gone, *McLean Contracting Company* was alive and well. According to company history, it was greatly involved in the war effort during the First World War, building docks and railroad yards for the Navy. In fact, at least half of *McLean's* jobs were related to the

military in 1918. The company was eventually recognized and commended for its work during World War I.

The company survived the Great Depression and then went on to be an important contributor during World War II. In 1942, it employed an estimated 2,163 men. That is seven times the current number of employees. In 1943, the company was, once again, awarded for its performance, "providing excellent quality work with an exceptional level of organization and efficiency".

Company history maintains that "innovation and adaptation have been essential in the development of *McLean*." In more recent years, the company designed its first floating crane, *Cape Fear*. Today, the company owns a fleet of floating cranes. *McLean Contracting Company* has also developed the technology to make its own pre-stressed concrete. Currently an employee owned company, *McLean* "maintains its own tug boats and push boats, crew boats, work boats and floating cranes, as well as an assortment of pile hammers, buckets, air compressors, welding machines, trucks, forklifts, pumps, backhoes, hydraulic hammers, loaders, shears, manlifts, jackboats and generators." After one hundred years in the heavy construction business, *McLean Contracting Company* can tackle a wide range of land based and marine construction and claims that "it has developed a reputation for completing complex projects in innovative ways."

To learn more about this company and the projects it has tackled over the past century, check out its website at <http://www.mcleancont.com/>. Browse the site and appreciate the magnitude of this big American company, started a century ago by a big man from West River, right here in Antigonish County.

Catherine MacGillivray

Recent Acquisitions – Thank you!



Some apt donations have recently come from the estate of Aloma Hawley. Pictured are a yarn winder, a coal burning stove and a McIntosh spinning wheel. The wheel of the spinning wheel is not intact and the Museum is looking for a hobbyist or craftsperson who can assemble the pieces which are, thankfully, all there. Also donated were a seaman's clock and a jewellery scale. These household items originally belonged to Tramble relatives in the Tracadie area.

- Joe VanOirschot of Pleasant Valley brought in some photos of the Dutch Days that were once held in Antigonish.
- Brian Peters of Afton donated a postcard of Main Street dated about 1950.
- Helen Marie Giffin brought in some genealogical material from the H. M. MacDonald family of Maryvale.
- Miriam Smith donated two mugs that were crafted at two local pottery studios that once operated in Antigonish County – College Grant and Davenport. She also provided a scrapbook of information pertaining to our local opportunity shop.
- Bill Wood of Watertown, Massachusetts, contributed a lovely book of school-time compositions written by his grandmother, Dorothy Pushee, in 1910. Dorothy was a native of Antigonish.
- Omer and Doris MacGillivray brought in a butter press that had once belonged to his mother.
- C.J.F.X. donated a CD of the “Fun at Five Show” dating back to March 25, 1968.
- Dick Glencross donated some photos of local interest.

Exhibit at the Museum

The Museum has an exhibit of local hockey interests in celebration of the Stanley Cup's visit to Antigonish. Stop by to see and reminisce.

Genealogy

Edward Cameron of Boston is looking for MacDonald, Cameron and MacNeil connections from Heatherton and Grand Narrows. Please contact the Museum if you can help.



Looking to Find

The Museum is looking for additional shelves for units like the one pictured. These shelves are grey, industrial, and measure 90 x 45 cm. If anyone has any that they are willing to donate, or if anyone knows where they can be found, please contact the Museum. The goal is to increase the storage capacity of the shelving units.

Report

The Museum has had a quiet summer in terms of visitors, due, no doubt, to bridge construction on the East End. Still, we hosted an Elderhostel for a group of American folks. At the same time, we had visitors from as far away as Iceland, Austria, Germany, Scotland and England. We've had folks from Western Canada too. This was the perfect summer for folks to receive one-on-one assistance from the Museum staff.

Book Reading

On September 8, at 7:00 p.m., Marion Timmons, of Country Harbour, will be reading from her new book, *Wilderness Home: The Loyalist Founding of Country Harbour*. This event, held at the museum, is on behalf of the Museum and the Antigonish Library.

Reminder

The Museum will be closed on September 28, 2010, because of the *Historic Places Initiative* meeting.

Garden Club

The Garden Club will have a regular meeting on Monday, September 20, at 7:00 p.m. at the Museum.

Best wishes to our Summer Students!

A special thank-you to our summer students, Mary Anne MacDonald and Elizabeth O'Brien. Both ladies are returning to St. F. X. University this fall. Elizabeth is finishing her History degree and planning to further her studies in Museum work while Mary Anne is in her second year of Arts and Celtic Studies. As part of her work at the museum this summer, Mary Anne worked on a project where the focus was interpretation – telling the story of Antigonish Outreach through a variety of institutions, including the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Martha, CJFX Radio, the 4-H Movement and community gatherings. Elizabeth assisted with cataloguing, inventory and documenting collections. Both girls dealt with the public, sharing our rich history and material culture. We wish them both well.

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