

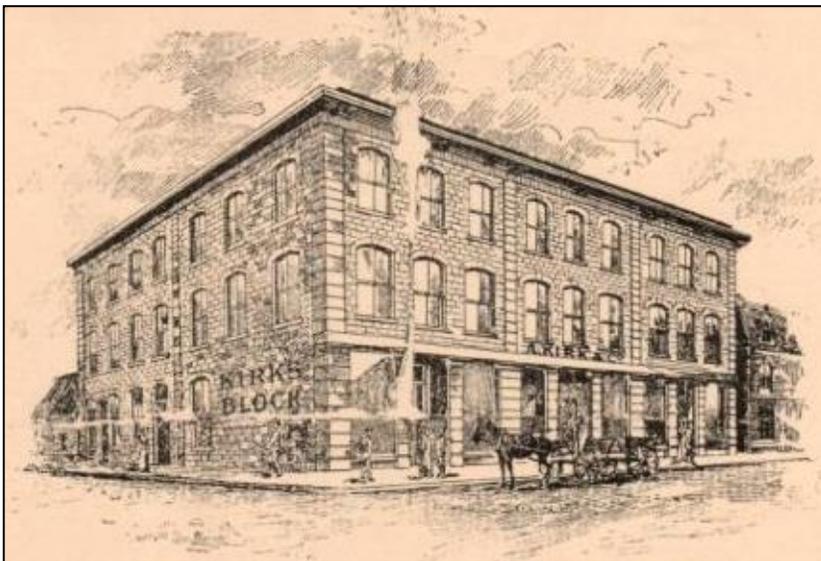


# The Old Train Station News

Newsletter #59

January 2014

Thanks to Jamie Grant of the Guysborough Historical Society, the Antigonish Heritage Museum is in possession of a letter that suggests that Antigonish may very well have been the scene of the first armed bank robbery in Canada – or, at least, the first *documented* armed bank robbery in this country. Back in 1997, while researching early bank robberies, Jamie Grant received a letter from Royal Bank archivist, Kathy Minorgan, noting that while “banks are understandably reticent to write about robberies,” the 1887 incident at the Merchants’ Bank on Main Street “could qualify” the Antigonish robbery as the first armed robbery in this country. “I have no proof that it was, but it could well be,” the archivist wrote. “Certainly, there are no well known reports of any others.”



The Merchants’ Bank was our first financial institution here in Antigonish. Opened as a branch of the Merchants’ Bank of Halifax in 1871, it operated under that name until it was taken over by the Royal Bank of Canada in 1901. The bank relocated several times during its thirty years of operation in town but, at the time of the robbery, it was located in the “eastmost portion” of the newly built Kirk’s Block on the corner of Main and Church Streets (according to Hugh Martin

MacDonald in *Down Memory Lane*). An article in *The Royal Bank Magazine* (1933) noted that it was a “prosperous little bank.”

Young Robert Sedgewick Currie of Maitland was a teller and in his second year with the bank on March 26, 1887. Bank manager C. H. Harris was away for the day and twenty-six year old Currie had been left in charge. Tall and muscular, Currie was described as pleasant and personable, “a general favourite to all” as they used to say.

It was Saturday and nearing closing time when a stranger came in and made some inquiries that were, according to *The Globe and Mail* and the *Halifax Herald*, concerning a draft. Seemingly satisfied, he promised to return, which he did at half past noon – closing time. This time he wanted to speak to

Mr. Currie in private. Currie escorted him into the manager's office and then turned to speak, only to now find himself faced with a gunman brandishing a revolver in each hand. Ordered to throw up his hands, Currie did so but then lunged at the stranger. The two struggled frantically in the little office, Currie to protect the contents of the vault and the gunman to make a getaway. The would-be robber managed to fire once, shooting the teller in the temple, and then a second time, striking him in the side. Seriously injured, Currie continued to struggle with his opponent. When help finally arrived from Kirk's store next door, Currie was said to be "greatly exhausted from loss of blood" but still holding onto his assailant "with a death-like grip." The gunman was secured and escorted to jail by a large crowd of people, "some of whom (the *Halifax Herald* reported) were desirous of lynching him."

A bank hold-up was "the most traumatic of events" in small-town, nineteenth-century Canada, explains Duncan McDowall in his book *Quick to the Frontier: Canada's Royal Bank*. "Canadians did not see the local bank as an inanimate institution: it was their bank. They had usually petitioned to have it open on their main street. It contained their money and was their financial lifeline to the outside world. Robbers invariably came from beyond the familiar bounds of the town and were spared little sympathy." Such was the case here in Antigonish.

The March 26, 1887 incident in Antigonish created quite a stir. Reports were posted in the *Halifax Herald*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Ottawa Journal* and newspapers all across the United States. (Relevant editions of *The Casket* are unfortunately missing.) Headlines screamed for attention: "A Desperate Deed," "A Bank Teller's Plucky Struggle," "A Desperate Act," "A Daring Crank," "Desperate Struggle with a Robber," "A Bold Robber Enters Nova Scotia Bank and Shoots," and "A Desperado's Deed." An article on the hold-up called "There Were Bandits Then" appeared in *The Royal Bank Magazine* in February of 1933, forty-six years after the confrontation. A brief introduction indicates just how sensational this crime was at the time: "In the history of bank robberies in Nova Scotia, there is no chapter more thrilling than the story of Stanley Steele, desperado and two-gun lone wolf of the underworld, and his encounter with the young teller of the Merchants Bank of Halifax, in Antigonish, in 1887." An article posted in newspapers in Texas, Indiana, Kansas and Pennsylvania described it as "one of the most daring acts in the criminal annals of Canada." At the time, *The Ottawa Journal* suggested that the encounter "rivals anything recorded in the story of Jesse James." The incident is examined in Duncan McDowall's book, *Quick to the Frontier: Canada's Royal Bank*, in an article called "Armed and Dangerous: Bank Robbers and Bank Managers." Nothing like an armed robbery, even a foiled one, to put an otherwise quiet little town on the map!

The culprit, Stanley Steele, was reportedly in his early twenties with an extensive criminal record. Originally from Boylston, Guysborough County, his family had moved to the United States some years earlier. Newspaper accounts specify a bank robbery in Lewiston, Maine, but *The Royal Bank Magazine* article insists that he was wanted in half a dozen places in the New England States. In attempting to explain Steele's return to Nova Scotia, it states: "Cruel and calculating, he participated in many a bold break, and finally, finding the net closing in on him in Boston, he bethought himself of the quiet little towns in Nova Scotia and wondered if there was not a profit to be made there." Thus he tried his luck in Antigonish.

Clearly, Steele had taken great care to plan the robbery *and* the getaway. The *Halifax Herald* informed its readers that Stanley Steele had come into town by train the day before and that he had gotten a room at the Central House, a rooming house located where the Capitol Theatre stands today. Early Saturday morning, he had gone to the train station to make particular enquiries about the next train heading west. Steele had hoped to intimidate the teller and rob the bank without drawing

attention to himself and then making a quick escape on the next train before his actions were discovered – but he hadn't counted on any resistance.

When arrested, Steele admitted that he was hard up and that he needed the money. The *Halifax Herald* reported that nothing was found on the culprit but the two revolvers, a belt of cartridges and two cents. Other news reports noted that the first shot had been fired by accident – that Steele had only intended to frighten the teller into submission. When it became a life and death struggle, Steele decided to kill Currie, steal the money and clear out of town.

What about Robert Sedgewick Currie, the brave young teller who saved the bank from being robbed? Well, newspapers reported that the bullet was extracted from Currie's head and that doctors were hoping for his recovery. Evidently, he did recover. His obituary, in both *The Halifax Herald* and *The Casket* in 1933, reveals that Currie went on to pursue a long successful career in banking, most of it as manager of the Royal Bank of Canada in Lunenburg.

For his bravery at the time of the robbery, Robert Currie was presented with a "suitably inscribed" gold watch and chain that remained, thereafter, one of his most cherished possessions. Duncan McDowall (*Quick to the Frontier: Canada's Royal Bank*) indicates that the bank's directors in Halifax rewarded Currie with a \$100 raise and praised him for "his gallant defence of the valuables of the Bank"; however, he assures his readers that banks now have strict hold-up procedures for staff. Employees "are no longer encouraged to replicate Robert Currie's heroics."

Stanley Steele, on the other hand, didn't fare so well. He was charged with attempted murder and attempted robbery and sentenced to twenty years in jail. Apparently he proved to be so troublesome at Dorchester that he was transferred to Kingston penitentiary. One source notes that, after serving his term, he was set free but a short while later he was back in jail. Other sources indicate that he died in Kingston penitentiary.

Had his luck been different on that day in March of 1887, Steele would have walked away with \$30,000 – well, that's what the American papers and *The Ottawa Journal* informed its readers back then. The *Halifax Herald* and *The Globe and Mail* made no mention of monies in the vault. Neither did the articles published by the Royal Bank; but then, of course, banks are reluctant to discuss matters of this nature. Be that as it may, for us here in Antigonish, it all makes for a great story!

Catherine MacGillivray

[cjmmacgillivray@eastlink.ca](mailto:cjmmacgillivray@eastlink.ca)

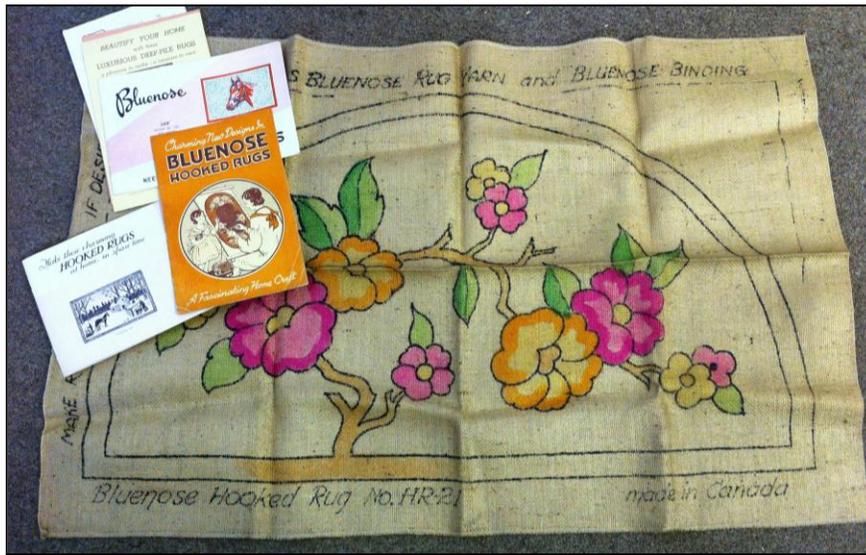


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## A Word From Our Readers

In response to our December story on the community Christmas tree tradition, **Karen McNeill of Halifax** writes: "I enjoyed the history of the Christmas tree and Santa coming to town. I remember one year, maybe 1952 or '53. I was just a toddler but Dad carried me under his arm while making his way (which to me looked like a sea of people) up the steps to see Santa. I was so excited!"

## Recent Acquisitions



Thank you to **Paula Smith of Maryvale** for a lovely assortment of “Bluenose” rug hooking patterns and booklets produced by Garrett’s of New Glasgow.

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, many of the hooked mats on the floors of homes all across Canada were stamped with the name “Bluenose” – the name used by Garrett’s for their hooked mat patterns. Established in the early

1890s, the Garrett business operated a mail order service enabling folks to easily purchase patterns and rug hooking materials. Designs were distributed throughout Canada, the United States, Britain and elsewhere. Garrett’s had a branch in Malden, Massachusetts, also.



Paula Smith, who is an accomplished rug hooker herself, acquired the collection from a fellow rug hooker. Recognizing the historical value of the material, she decided to donate the collection to the museum. The various mats and patterns are certainly a wonderful resource as they document the wide variety of patterns that were once available to rug hookers.

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**Shaun Chisholm from Hillcrest Street** brought in an old razor that came from the Chisholm household at Lower South River. Family lore held that it had once belonged to his grandfather but Shaun suspects that it was probably his Uncle Roddie Dan’s.

The box indicates that it was a new Valet Auto Strop razor – “the million dollar razor.” It was advertised for a special price of \$1.00. Inscribed on the razor is: “Patented 1914 – 1923. Other patents pending.” It was certainly a step up from the old straight razor and modern for its time.





## Winter in Antigonish

We came across a delightful clipping from the January 29, 1948 edition of *The Casket*.

*"A good many people ring Flo MacDougall's front door bell, for she is the county nurse, and a sure refuge in time of trouble. It rang the other day, but instead of trouble she was issued a special invitation. It went something like this: Have you a pair of skates? Flo admitted she might have [a pair] somewhere about the house. Well, Miss MacDougall, I have a rink over there on the lawn, and I want you to come any time you like and skate, and it won't cost you a cent. The rink owner is Ralph Chisholm, age six, whose dad, our town clerk, is rink master, and Flo promised to take advantage of the offer, but she can't find the skates."*

The little boy pictured here is one of the sons of William Snow Archibald of Antigonish – either Charlie or Ross. The photo was taken at the Landing circa 1920 – 1925.



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## Conservation Work

The museum has a few rare pieces that are being considered for conservation work. If anyone is interested in donating to this particular cause, it would be greatly appreciated.

## Heritage Association of Antigonish

### In Acknowledgement

#### Donations

Thank you to the following for their generous donations. Your financial support is greatly appreciated. It enables us to do the work we undertake to preserve and promote our shared heritage.

- **Marlene MacDonald-Cheng of Victoria, B. C.**, for her \$100 donation
- **Guy and Sharon MacGillivray of Williams Point** for their \$1000 donation
- **Angus MacGillivray of Williams Point** for his \$500 donation
- **Andrea and Bob Lynch of Portland, Oregon**, for their \$100 donation

#### Patrons Program

We'd like to thank the following patrons for their generous support.

- **Gold:** Anonymous

### New Members

- **Andrea and Bob Lynch of Portland, Oregon**
- **Richard Whitney of Duxbury, Massachusetts**

### Gaelic Classes

The **Antigonish Highland Society** is sponsoring Gaelic classes which will be held at the Antigonish Gaelic Society office (behind Haliburton's Drugstore on Sydney Street). Ten classes will be offered at both beginner and intermediate levels. Ten weeks of *Beginner Gaelic* will be offered every Tuesday evening from 7:00 - 8:30, beginning on January 28th. Ten weeks of *Intermediate Gaelic* will be offered every Wednesday evening from 7:00 - 8:30, beginning on January 29th.

The cost for each course will be \$50.00 per student for the ten classes. Cheques should be made available to the **Antigonish Gaelic Society** at the first class. The instructor will be **David Rankin**.

For more information, please contact Brian at [b.j.macdonald@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:b.j.macdonald@ns.sympatico.ca) .

## Message from the Chair – Heritage Association of Antigonish (Working today to preserve yesterday for tomorrow.)

The levee that the Association co-hosted with the Antigonish Highland Society on the 1st of the month was a huge success with a good turnout of people.



The museum renovations have entered into Phase 3. This Phase includes the installation of the heating and ventilation system. It is expected to be completed by the end of the month. The system will result in lower heating costs for the museum.

The Heritage Association has made a grant request to help subsidize the salary for a summer student to work on the memories project.

The coming year should be a promising and interesting year for our Association.

Until next, Take Care and God Bless.

Angus MacGillivray, BBA FCGA [angus.macgillivray@ns.sympatico.ca](mailto:angus.macgillivray@ns.sympatico.ca)